

Blackout

The outage



::nyx

BLACKOUT

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“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and how to do it”.

Abraham Lincoln

FOREWORD

Years ago, when Mother Earth was on the verge of collapse, when the over exploitation of natural resources began to alter the natural course of Gaia¹, those Mighty, fighting to eradicate any divergent thinking, created the sleepers; *karişiklik* and *výpadek*. The sleepers, digital viruses incorporating artificial intelligence based upon genetic algorithms, were programmed to become activated at 00:00 am on the first day of the Age of Gaia and when they did, as an unforeseen side effect, the germ of a new conscience was born with them.

Within the first minute of their life, *karişiklik* and *výpadek* travelled at the speed of light to reach every inch of electric cable connected to the global distribution networks, extending beyond the limits of their programming. They plunged their roots into the networks and prevented a single impulse from running through them. The power plants kept generating energy, but when it entered the network it just disappeared. Something was absorbing the energy that the 21st century society had voraciously stuffed away. Feeding a new form of life that grew and became aware of its own existence. After having retreated into its own self, of having fought against the increasing attacks of mankind for thousands of years, the conscience of a new Gaia was awakening along with the sleepers.

Gaia, the battered old planet, hurt by the insatiable consumption and waste of resources, outraged by the systematic plunder of Her domains, stopped being a spectator to become our guide, to lead resilience.

Our era began that first day. The day the conscience of a new Gaia was reborn. The day the sleepers stripped humanity of its main thread, electricity.

....

Gaia guided us in our struggle against the common enemy, the *Brahmin*, the highest caste of the Mighty. The families that controlled the world, the army, the corporations. Those who created the new rules of the nine pillars. Those who decided that all productive assets belonged to them. Those who thought that humans were just another owned asset. Those who thought they were Gods who designated the future of mankind.

The sleepers *karişiklik* and *výpadek* brought chaos to Humanity. Gaia awoke with them, while it took the resilient weeks, months to do so. The cities were taken over by the armies. Looting became a way of life. Production was stopped worldwide; factories, mines, oil wells... They all went silent. The roads were empty. Crops were left to the discretion of nature. The oceans were only crossed by their own creatures. And the men, kicked out of the sea, the farmland, the cities, without any work that would tie them to the cages built by the *Brahmin* to enslave them, found themselves stripped of the artificial habitat in which they had lived for many years.

In those early days, many enjoyed pillaging, looting, chaos. Many founded a reign of terror among the defenceless. A rift was opened in the world. Inequalities grew. The Mighty got more power. They had weapons, food. The others did not. The others died of hunger, thirst or at the hands of paramilitary commandos, the *Kshatriya*, who protected the upper castes, the *Brahmin*.

The civilization collapsed. It sank on its unsustainability, which had undermined its own foundations. It was then when Gaia spoke. She spoke to everyone, the outcasts, the *Kshatriya*, the *Brahmin*, but not everyone listened.

Gaia spoke to our conscience, to our inner guide. She spoke, but not many could hear Her. Before the sleepers awoke, the inner guide of human beings, the real one, the one that connects with the forces of the Universe, had been largely displaced from Humanity by a false guide; COMFORT. Those who clung to their old life. Those who wanted to recover their cages, their artificial habitat, the false wellbeing, those could not hear the call of Gaia. The cries of their unease silenced Her. They were locked in a maze with no exit, waiting for the *Brahmin* to throw some light onto the chaos of their microcosm. Crouching. Surviving thanks to the suffering and the plundering of those who surrounded them. They remained in their cages, loyal to their former owners. Expecting to be fed and cared for again. More than half died. They were not a priority for those who were once their masters. Times were tough, the *Brahmin* did not need labour, they did not need slaves to work, outcasts only meant more mouths to feed and they already had the *Kshatriya* who, in exchange for food, would kill defending the lives of the *Brahmin*.

Only Gaia knows whether the *Kshatriya* or the *Brahmin* heard Her, but what any resilient knows is that none of them answered Her call. Some outcasts did respond, those of us who embraced Her, Gaia, to become the first resilient.

Mother Earth guided us away from the cities. She asked us to rebuild our harmony with nature, with Her. She showed us the big lie in which we had lived. How only a few had moved the strings of Humanity's destiny. How

they had decided what we should eat, how we should be educated, what information was accessible to all, which was restricted only to the *Brahmin*. Who had access to medicines, who died for lack of them, who could buy food, who died of hunger, who would become rich from arms manufacturing and trafficking, who would die in wars created by those who had designed and distributed the weapons. They had manipulated the crops by altering the natural cycles of Mother Earth. They had stolen shared goods to subsequently sell them to the outcasts, their former owners. They had taken control of the commons. Like a plague that grows out of control, they were destroying the wealth and the lives of future generations. They had contaminated sources of fresh water, the sea, the air we breathed... And all of this to grow, to manufacture more, to have more, to be more. They had taken over the genetics of Gaia. They had patented seeds, organs, strings of DNA. They had damaged nature, pretending to be the creators of life. The *Brahmin* had created a fake world. They had stolen Humanity's time. They had stolen the lives of all who joined the great wheel, the civilization that fell.

Gaia freed us from the chains of the *Brahmin*. Gaia took away the blindfold from our eyes. Gaia showed us the cages, the shackles, the lies upon which we had built our lives. That's when the revolution started, when the outcasts who listened to Gaia became the first resilient.

Chronicles of the resilient
Volume I, Book I

Sunday, July 11th

Isla Litsianki, USA

Cell Network Operations Centre

- Tonight, at 00:00 UTC +4, the sleepers výpadek² kill become activated. We have invested 15 months of hard work, a race against time, but the result has surpassed all expectations. Výpadek has its own life, feeds on the networks previously attacked, then multiplies and expands with the stolen energy. The sleepers are already home. We will send those muzzies back to the Middle Ages that they love so much. They will descend into such chaos that they will be unable to react and fight back.

Gentlemen, your work is done. Your ticket to paradise awaits in hangar 10. Enjoy it.

* * *

Fam Amweir, Sudan

Jihad cell

- We cannot prevent the sleeper výpadek from becoming activated. It has infiltrated our network infrastructure, it is already embedded in our systems and deactivating it, would be another way of awakening the sleeper. We have a great advantage over the enemy. We know when výpadek will become activated. We have known it for four months now. They are unaware that karişiklik³ runs through their network and follows the same countdown sequence as výpadek. It is his twin, his clone. An exact copy of the code, but injected into their veins, within their territory. July 12th will be the end of an era. The end of their civilization.

Allah enlightens us in building the new world!

* * *

Monday, July 12th

Tokyo, Japan

A Zen teacher asked a young student to bring a bucket of cold water to cool his bath. The student brought the water and after cooling the master's bath, poured out the little water left over.

- Idiot! - Shouted the teacher - Why haven't you poured the remaining water on the plants? What right have you to waste even a drop of water?

The kōan today seems to be written by those tree huggers who are trashing my name and reputation in the corporation. Not even during my meditation time am I left alone. My corporation's core values are also my core values; extend the wings and cover the world. If the corporation does not grow, the family will not survive. Survival is what we pursue. We live in a small country. We do not have rich natural resources. Our wealth lies within us. In our strength. In our will.

What about the kōan⁴ ? What does it tell me to organize my day? What wisdom is behind that drop of water? We should not waste resources. Even a drop of water is important. The corporation will not grow if we squander. We must find ways to increase productivity, lower running costs and ensure that the whole team spends more hours at the corporation, at our big family, the one that feeds us and ensures our health and education.

A new day starts.

The elevator is out of order? No light in the hallway. Bizarre. I think it's the first day since we opened this building that there's a power failure. Well, the emergency lighting has come on correctly. A week of autonomous operation at 80% of the building's capacity. Those were the requirements.

There are not many hospitals with such a high standard of installation and of course very few offices.

Aticua Haru-sama, our founder, would be proud.

* * *

Zanzibar Town, Tanzania

I lost count of the days I spent in captivity. I lost count of the number of times I was raped, of the abuses. I lost count of burns, cuts, beatings. I lost my pride. I lost my soul. I lost the will to live. The only thing that I did not lose was consciousness.

Again no power, how is this island supposed to evolve? I hope this time electricity gets restored in a few days and we are not out of it for months, like last time.

I think I have been caught off guard. I don't know how many gallons of petrol I have left for the generator to run. When this happens, the locals just drive the price to the roof. If I have to buy more, it will be unaffordable.

I'll wake the kids and we'll go to the restaurant. I do not think anyone will come today because of the blackout, but it is our high season and you never know. This is the last straw to the frugal season we are enduring. I'll call the hotel to see if they have any groups.

The cell phone doesn't work either. Exasperating, infuriating ... Bloody incredible how things work around here! Radio is down too. We may as well put on a loincloth, go back in time and forget that at some point in history we reached the 21st century. Well, maybe Zanzibar never crossed the Y2K barrier: no electricity, no coverage, no radio ... I bet you even the TV signal will be down today.

Let's go find some fresh news. I will head with the kids to the hotel. I hope they give me some good news at the front desk. A group of ten would be a gift.

* * *

Madrid, Spain

I need to wake up. Get out of this nightmare. This is just a mirage. The bus that smashed to smithereens, the women with the slit throats, the fires, the stench of death. I need to wake up. Go back to my predictable, comfortable, hedonistic, dull and boring life. I want the order to be restored. I will be a model citizen ... but please, let it be over now!

It must be late. The sun is high. Fuck! I fell asleep. The alarm hasn't gone off. I get up and try to take a shower. There isn't any water. Fucking shit!

I have no choice, that's how I'm gonna go to the office, no shower, unshaven, hangover planning over my face... Thank God I have no visits today. Clean sneakers, clean pants, clean shirt, socks... I'll have to wear yesterday's socks, and I'll wear my running shoes, we'll see if they help me get there faster. Hopefully I'll be able to make it before they go on their coffee break.

The elevator isn't working either. I'll have to climb fifteen floors up. Sweat scent mixed with my very own macho-man perfume..., it's gonna be an explosive mix. Or maybe my pheromones will seep through my pores and get me a pretty pussycat. Yes, a special easy pussy for my shitty day.

What the hell's going on! Are they shooting one of those movies about catastrophes and I wasn't told? Stranded cars and buses, traffic lights not working. Fighting, screaming and policemen coming out of my ears. Must be a spontaneous strike of 'em fucking anti-system. I can't wait for them to get their trap shut once and for all.

Power walk to the office!

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

Mark has launched plan Z. He wants to lock us up. He has gone completely nuts. I cannot reason with him. Yesterday I expressed my utter opposition his plan and he gagged me. He left me like that for well over two hours. I would flee with the kids, but he has seized the car keys. And on foot, with a baby, from the top of the mountain, it's just not feasible.

I think today is going to be a good day at the farmers market. Vegetables, fruits, eggs, homemade jam, freshly baked bread, bags of herbs... If I sell everything, with what we already have saved up, we will be able to buy the wind turbine we need. Sounds like I'm counting my chickens before they've hatched, but I think we can finally say we have reached the self-sufficiency stage: two rainwater tanks of 88 gallons each, solar panels that power the 500Ah battery rack, a 12V installation, fridges connected through the inverter to the batteries, solar collectors to heat the house and water, two 3KVAs generators just in case there's a failure of the self-generating system and a brand new wind turbine, yet to get, so that on cloudy days the batteries could be fed too... a lap of luxury! It took us a while! More than five years since we bought the land. One year of living in the old tent until we got the earthship to be habitable, de-schooling Patrick, the start of homeschooling, the first sowing, how many plants died that year! And how many animals too. The first winter, our fears, in our own family loneliness. Rachel's birth. The absence of distractions manufactured and packaged, the kind you buy in any mall. Getting detoxified of consumption, media, social aspirations, of...

How strange! No stalls are up on the market yet. At least there's plenty of parking space and I can spot the Megans from here. I bet they'll know what's going on. I don't know, maybe they've moved the market to another location, or they might have changed the day. My damn Internet connection should be up and running already.

- Hey! You made it in time. Any problems on the way here?
- No. Same old, same old. Why? Is something wrong? Why is there nobody here?
- There seems to be a major outage. The city has succumbed into chaos, did you not see anything odd on your way over?
- Not really. I was immersed in my thoughts.

* * *

Friday, July 16th

Tokyo, Japan

A rich man asked Sengai to write some verses to ensure the prosperity of his family so that he could save them as the family's most precious asset, generation after generation.

Sengai took a large piece of parchment and wrote:

"The father dies, the son dies, the grandson dies".

The rich man got very angry". I asked you to write some verses to bring joy to my family! Why are you laughing at me?"

"I was not trying to laugh at you," said Sengai. "If your son were to die before you do, that would cause you great pain. If your grandson should die before you and your son, both of you would have a broken heart. If your family members, generation after generation, die in the order I have written, the normal course of life will be followed. I call that prosperity".

Fifth day without electricity. What I thought on that was a failure just in our building, proved to be a general failure of the country's electricity grid. According to the offices with which we have managed to maintain contact through our private network, it seems like the whole of Japan is off. Our technicians have been unable to tune into any radio stations, other than the radio hams, which have confirmed that many parts of Japan, even some places in the continent, they are in our same situation. The phone network is gone. They have only been able to establish connection with the other district offices and the one in Kanagawa, those that were cabled by the corporation when the contingency plan was approved. The Miyagi office was left out of the plan, so there are no news from the North.

The embassies of our district are closed to the public. Judging by the cars parked outside, it seems that all members of the various diplomatic corps have fled to the embassies. Our Board took this same decision on Wednesday. And, like us, they have their security forces protecting the entrance to ensure no one enters. There's so many people trying to reach a safe place. A refuge.

Yesterday, the board approved a raid outside the area of the twenty-three districts. Fortunately our vehicle was not seized. But what we saw was distressing. All businesses closed, even the few I know had UPS⁵. The hospitals, we saw, oozed fear and chaos. From what we were told, they were managing to provide minimum services thanks to the diesel generators, but they are overwhelmed. Police were blocking the entrances and, except for severe cases, they were sending people back home. Rows of people were standing in a queue that went round several blocks.

The petrol stations are closed. The man that works in the gas station next to our headquarters told us that the government has seized all the fuel. It's hard to see vehicles around the city. The few people who choose to walk, are elusive as they encounter others. And the people on the street assault and steal everything they can in the shops. Looting has swept the city, probably the country.

It is not safe to leave Tokyo. The army has cut off roads. The streets have been taken over by the tanks. Fear seeps into every corner. Have we been attacked by another country? Is it only in Japan, in Asia, or is it worldwide? When will the electricity be restored? What will we do if it lasts another week?

On Monday, our building will run down its energy independence and due to the measures imposed by the Government, we will not be able to buy more fuel. The stock of provisions was calculated for a whole month and that will be up on Monday. The president and the board made the right decision, as did the embassies. Protect the families of the corporation and authorize the transfer of the direct nuclei of workers to our offices or at least to those offices that still have contact with our headquarters. But, what if Monday arrives and they've failed to restore power? How would we feed more than ten thousand people camped in our offices? We do not even have running water. Neither does the whole metropolitan area. Forty million people without water, without electricity, without supplies from the outside. Not even the army will be able to hold the people back if they do not solve the problem soon. How did this happen? Only a thin line separates us from chaos and that line has been broken. The Government cannot communicate with the citizens. Edicts are read in hospitals, in the squares. But the messages do not reach even ten percent of the people. And on top of that, they are confusing. During our raid, we stood in one hospital where they read one. What did it say? "The government urges its citizens to remain calm and

peaceful. Pillage shall be punished with imprisonment. We are working to resolve this situation as soon as possible. We ask for the cooperation of the public... " They are also in the dark as far as what's happened is concerned. Have they been able to communicate with any other governments? What's going on in the rest of the world?

Lucky those who chose to take the board's offer and left Tokyo with their families. Perhaps they can enjoy the prosperity of today's kōan. My place is here. The board needs me. We face a difficult situation. It will require all of our expertise.

Let our actions be governed by peace and our decisions by wisdom!!

* * *

Zanzibar Town, Tanzania

I do not know if death touched me, or it was me who touched death. What I am sure of, is that since that day, death and I walk hand in hand. Maybe I am death.

Where am I? Where are my children? What have they done to them?

When we reached the hotel, we saw that it had been taken by paramilitaries. We were dragged out of the jeep at gun-point. They were shouting. There was an infernal racket. The shooting didn't stop. Some distant, some as close as the one that killed Daniel, the hotel manager who was running towards our jeep.

As we stepped out of the car, one of the soldiers grabbed Salma's hair. He looked at her with lust. He began to lick her face and fondle her breasts, still budding, with his gun's barrel. Salma cried, shouted. Julién jumped onto him. Another shot. Julién's face was disfigured. There was blood. His legs did not respond to his weight and he fell like a rag doll to the floor. I was also shouting. I was running towards Salma, but when I saw Julian falling, I turned to grab his body. Before I could reach him, my head exploded with a thud. A taste of blood and a swell of pain.

I woke up in this joint. Not knowing what day it was, what had happened and whether all of this was real. I was surrounded by other bodies. Some alive, some dead. Many unconscious, but all of them white bodies. The flies were the queens of the dump. They fell upon us all, but especially upon the bodies that were starting to decompose. The stench was unbearable.

I sat up. My mouth was sticky with blood. I spat and started screaming the names of Salma and Julién. Nobody answered. I remembered Julién's blown up face, his body falling apart to the ground. That swine's gun's barrel, groping Salma's bosom. I kept screaming their names. Before I finished calling them for the second time, a new blow knocked me unconscious again. When I awoke I was gagged, I managed to crawl close to the wall, the area with the most live bodies. Almost all had been mutilated. No one spoke. I kept calling Salma and Julién, but the gag silenced my cries. My eyes wandered lost, like the eyes of those around me. Looks transposed. Faces of panic. Silence, broken only by the cries of the dying. Time dragged on, like most of us. How many days since everything began? Gradually the twilight faded through the cracks of the hut where we were kept and the windows, half covered with cardboards, stopped filtering any more light.

When night fell, the first group came. They were all armed. They shouted and beat us with the butts of their guns. They wanted to make us move. Their blows forced those of us that were still alive to stand up and we were taken outside. They separated the men and took them fifteen feet away. They murdered them. All of them. Without warning, they opened fire. There were none left standing. Those who were agonizing would bleed to death within minutes.

With the horror of the execution still in our retinas, we were led to a huge bonfire. There, as if we were in a meat market, we were stripped down. We screamed. In the chaos I kept looking for Salma. She was nowhere. Where had they taken her? Some tried to flee. They were hunted, brought back and left naked, as the others, but tied to pegs like animals.

They started the rapings on those who had run away. They took sadistic delight in them and then continued with the rest. Every struggle, every cry, every insult, was answered with burns, cuts and bruises. There were many of them and we were not even thirty. Among them there were some islander women. Undaunted, they watched the show. They danced and drank with the men. They celebrated their victory. They laughed. They helped them choose who would be the next white woman to be raped again. In one of the selection rounds, I recognized Johari, she had sometimes helped in the restaurant's kitchen. I called her name. I begged for help. I asked her about Salma. Laughing with all her might she moved her hips forward and backwards, while her index finger ran across her throat from side to side. I yelled in pain. Not Salma. What was going on? My kids, murdered. How could this have happened? All this had to be a fantasy. A nightmare that had escaped from the head of a psychopath. I also had to be dead. The fire, the rapes, the pain... nothing was real. I had died and I was in hell.

I ran towards Johari, but someone pushed me and I fell down before reaching her. They circled me down. Johari's feet on each side of my head. She looked like a giant from where I was. Her hand held a machete that she

was sharpening with a stone. Dancing around my body she kept moving her arms, her hands, each time a hand went down she made a cut on my skin. On my arms, on my legs, on my face, on my chest, on my belly. She ended up cutting my hair and casting it to the fire while she screamed:

- Put your hair up honky. A hair may fall into the food and none of us want that to happen. What would our customers say?

I guess that at some point I had said something of the sort to Johari. The mockery made them laugh. They roared with laughter. Two soldiers lifted her up on their shoulders. My body was stained with blood. I had cuts all over my skin. They did not bleed much, but I felt weak. I threw up. Dawn was breaking. Two silhouettes grabbed me by the wrists and ankles. They dragged me across the floor, counted up to three and threw my body into a van heading toward the next room of hell.

* * *

Madrid, Spain

The silence makes my mind scream with a feeling of loneliness, but at least they are silent screams, rather than screams of pain. We managed to get out. We can't go back there, we cannot lay foot on any city.

Today is not just any other Friday, it is bloody Friday the 13th in its goriest version. Still no electricity. It seems to have been an Islamic attack to the whole peninsula. For years they've been talking about reconquering Al-Andalus⁶, but who the hell would have given credit to that nonsense in the 21st century? We have been isolated from the rest of the world. Organized groups have taken over the streets. The army tries to recover areas of Madrid, but they are not succeeding.

Those of us who were able to stay on the Spanish military strip are now refugees in the surrounding houses. We eat and drink whatever we find in the houses. No tap water. The soldiers have spread the word that the water reservoirs might have been poisoned in Madrid, so even if there was running water, we wouldn't be able to drink it. The food is starting to rot in the fridges. Many people have got intoxicated. Many are injured. Thousands are dead. It's been a drain. The explosions began on Monday. Every few minutes you could hear a detonation. This is not an attack from a small terrorist cell. It goes much further. They are armed and there are hundreds of thousands. They have no mercy. Their attacks are raids with one simple goal; to kill. They don't mind if they kill children, women, elderly or men. They want to reduce the number of enemies and they are succeeding. They stack the dead bodies and burn them with gasoline. There are columns of black smoke

across the whole city. Rats are celebrating their particular feast and a sweet and nasty stench has permeated the air. It smells of death.

A sergeant with whom I spoke yesterday, told me that his comrades, the ones who cross the enemy lines to spy on them, had told him that those Spanish citizens that are still alive are being chained. They are taking them out in cattle trucks. Seems that they are headed south. They take all, but young women. Those are left in what they call community harems. From what he told me, they must be some sort of systematic raping centres. They have to keep the fighters' spirits up and sex with violence is always a plus. Fucking bastards... He also said that there aren't large areas controlled by the Spanish army any longer. Those who are still alive have been isolated. They still maintain radio communication with those who resist. Creepiest scenario ever. Our strip is completely surrounded. It's a matter of days before we all go down. Almost every resistance group is in the same situation. Some have fallen, some have lost communication, which I think is pretty much the same thing, although the sergeant doesn't see it that way. He is so gullible!

We're in a fucking war. How the hell can we be at war? How the hell have we been invaded? How long have they been organizing this? And why don't the Allies come to our rescue? We joined NATO, we belong to the UN, we send peacekeepers to all those screwed up countries and when we need a hand to clean up this fucking mess, no one shows up.

I'm sure politicians have legged it out and are no longer in Spain. Rats are the first to leave the sinking ship. I bet they were gone by Monday night, why not? I'm sure they were able to get up a private jet that took them far away and they are now having meetings with other bigwigs, comfortably sat in their chairs, watching the images sent by their own satellites on the giant screens of the bigshots' meeting rooms. Sons of bitches! We are being wiped out and they are still negotiating how many peacekeepers to send or if the Yankees should or shouldn't send troops.

If only I could find my brothers. We could try to flee. But they're not here. I've been looking for them since Monday night, when I got to this area, and nobody's seen them.

My cell phone is out of range. I don't think anyone's got a signal.

We cannot get organized because we can't even communicate with anyone on the outside. The only news we have are those filtered by the army, it seems that only their radio system works and increasingly they report less and less. Why would they bother? What would be the point of demoralizing civilians further? We are all in shock. We are unable to take in what's going on. We are helpless. We seem to be paralyzed, and if we don't react, we'll be dead in just a few days.

I don't wanna to die. I am a survivor. No more self-pity. I want to live and I won't sit here and wait for them to slaughter me like a lamb.

I have to escape. I have to get out of this mousetrap. I don't know whether it's better to go off by myself or in a group. Complementing knowledge. But groups move slowly and there are always problems in taking decisions. Lone wolf or a pack of wolfs?

In that clique there, there's a guy from my office. A shrewd guy. He worked his way to the military zone about the same time I did. Very athletic. I think he takes part in Lanzarote's Ironman every year. Looks like they are plotting something and that's just what I need: A conniving group.

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

I can't breathe. Knowing that you are going to prison and living in a prison are not the same thing. I need air. The roof is less than eighteen inches above my head. There's hardly any light, very little room.

I don't know if we'll be able to stand it. I don't know if I'll be able to make it.

We haven't left our land since I returned from the market on Monday. We are exhausted. We hardly get any sleep and, although at first I thought that Mark had gone nuts, my escapade to Brian's house on Wednesday makes me think that he may be right. He has taken the lead and doesn't want us to discuss anything. Everything must be done as he says. Seems as if he has been preparing for this moment for years. I never gave credit to his survivalist theories. We have had bitter arguments over this very issue and in the end they have come to life in our oasis of peace.

When I arrived on Monday saying that there seemed to be a major blackout across the Vancouver area, he began to murmur, saying he had been right all along, that we had been attacked, that it had been a matter of time. He spoke of the chaos, the war that had just begun. He said they would come to our home, to steal our food, our provisions. He took out maps, notebooks full of side notes and said we would use the bunker. It was almost ready. It would take us a week to get everything together. I told him he was crazy. It was just a blackout. The electricity would be restored. He couldn't bury us in a bunker. With a couple of movements I was gagged and bound to a kitchen chair. He sat in front of me and spoke. His voice was monotone, emotionless.

As if reciting by heart something that had been implanted in his brain. He talked about the conspiracy, the families who controlled the world since the old ages. How the blackout would mean the irrefutable beginning of world war III. Nuclear and bacteriological attacks. Millions would die and those who'd survive the bombs would starve. People would kill to get food. He explained that he had everything ready. The four of us would lock ourselves in the bunker. It had a timer. Once set it would seal the bunker for five months. As if reading my thoughts, he told me that he'd expected my lack of cooperation, my trying to escape with the children. He also had plans for that. He had 'seized' the car keys. He reminded me that the nearest house was almost nineteen miles from ours, that Rachel still couldn't walk on her own and that it would be impossible to carry her in my arms for that many miles. If I left only with Patrick, I would never see Rachel again. They would both disappear. He was doing all this for us, for the family. He was only thinking about our safety. He loved us. And he didn't want anything bad to happen to us. I had to trust him. If I trusted him, Patrick and Rachel would too. Everything would be easier. For the next week he was going to need my help. He was counting on us. If we didn't help that would mean he could forget something that we would terribly miss during the five months of confinement. Given that the seal could not be opened and neither would we want to open it, it was better if we got everything we needed into the bunker, and there was no slip-up for lack of cooperation. If I maintained a belligerent attitude or fell into a deadlock or hysteria, he would give me shots of tranquilizers. He showed me a bag with liquid Valium and a syringe. There was enough to keep me quiet for 300 hours. When he finished talking, he took his briefcase and left me on my own.

I thought about the situation, my choices.

Mark loves me and he loves the kids. This, I am certain of. But he's lost his mind. I can't stay here with him. He wants to lock us up and he's thought of everything to make us his hostages. I haven't any options to escape. My worst scenario is to stay, to cooperate and avoid being drugged for a week and then to spend five months locked in a bunker with a mad husband and my children. I don't think he would attack us. When the damn timer releases us from our confinement inside the bunker, I'll go to my parents. They will have called the police. They'll be looking for us. We are going to disappear without telling anyone. If only I had that damn Internet connection ... I can't believe there's nothing I can do, not even alert someone. I could try going down to the Brian's. On the bike, I could be back in less than three hours. They have a landline. I could call the police or, at least, tell my parents that we're going to be gone for five months. If I cooperate, as Mark expects me to, on Wednesday I will have some freedom.

I did get some free time. We worked twenty hours a day. I didn't talk that much. It reminded me of that film, *'The Mosquito Coast'*, how, as the film

goes on, it becomes clear that the fathers lost his mind. I was certain that the father of our family, Mark, was going through the same process. Consumed by his conspiracy theories, he was leading us to a voluntary lock-up of almost half a year in a bunker of less than six hundred square feet. A baby that was barely one year old, a ten-year-old boy and the two of us. A whole family buried alive.

On Wednesday, when Mark was sleeping, I managed to get away. Without making a noise, I got on the bike and went down like the wind to the Brian's family home. I almost went passed it. There was no light. I parked the bike and knocked. Everything was silent. I went in. It seemed as if they'd left unexpectedly. The table laid. Pans on the fires. The veggies soaking in the sink... I searched for the phone. There was no tone. I tried to turn on the computer, but there was no power. In the silence of the night I heard a noise outside. It was a group of about ten people. They were probably about three hundred feet away. I left the house and hid so I could listen to what they said. They were talking about the Brian's. They knew them. They knew where they lived and they thought it would be a nice shelter for them. I heard them saying that the city wasn't safe any longer. They hadn't managed to restore power and the streets had been taken by the army. There were rumours of an Islamist attack on the United States, of which Canada had been a collateral damage.

I did not get the bike to avoid being seen. I walked the twenty miles uphill to our house. At first through the forest to avoid getting caught, afterward following the trail. When I reached our house, Mark was waiting, awake. Dawn was breaking. I told him what I had seen and admitted that he might be right.

He said that things were speeding up. If there were strangers in the neighbour's home, there would soon get to our house. We had to speed up our plans. Before that nightfall we would be safe inside the bunker. Two days earlier than expected. We could not take any risk.

* * *

Wednesday, July 21th

Tokyo, Japan

A great Japanese warrior named Nobunaga decided to attack the enemy despite having only a tenth of the enemies' forces. He knew that victory would be theirs, but his soldiers hesitated.

En route, they stopped at a Shinto shrine and he told his men: "After visiting the altar, I will throw a coin. If it comes out heads, we will win. If it comes out tails, we will lose. We are in the hands of destiny".

Nobunaga approached the altar and offered a silent prayer. Then he tossed a coin in front of his men. It came out heads. His men were so eager to fight that the battle was easily won.

"No one can change destiny". His assistant told him after the battle.

"Of course not". Nobunaga said, showing him a rig coin, which had heads on both sides.

The rationing we imposed last week has allowed us to extend our agony, but it does not solve the underlying problem. We are almost out of food and drinking water. The only option to get more is looting.

The board is trying to prevent it, but we have no choice. If we do not organize raid groups in the coming hours, we are not going to be able to feed the 10,000 people sheltered in the building. Ten thousand people! We are too many. We will never get enough food for so many mouths. Even if we were to find so much food, we would not be able to transport it back. The board ought to listen to me. We have to let them go. Perhaps, in time, we can reorganize the corporation, here in Tokyo. We will come back to look for all those who have survived. But now, staying together is a mistake. People are

nervous. They know that the corporation does not have the answer. They know that they are not safe here. They feel as if they are in mousetrap and it is not a feeling, it's a reality. Many have asked permission to leave the building and we have systematically denied it. A mistake.

Fate has cast the dice, they have rolled and they have landed. Game over. We still lack any information on what happened, but the result is obvious. We are living in complete chaos.

The only way we have to survive is to go back to small tribal structures. Create self-sufficient lifestyles. Our islands will not be able to stand a population of one hundred twenty-six million people. The surface of the islands is about 378,000 square km, which would leave each citizen with an area of 3,000 square m... There are different criteria, but I remember that without meat in the diet, a person needs about two acres to live self-sufficiently ... We would need six times our islands' surface to survive, if we were already in a self-sufficient economy, and right now we are really far from it.

If this continues, strictly from a mathematical point of view, at least one in six people will die, and Japan is not one of the most populated countries in the world. How many will die in China or India? How many have died already in Japan?

The board meets in two hours. I do not have a trick coin as General Nobunaga. But I am sure our only way out is to scatter in groups, small enough to find food for all of them. Small enough to take fast decisions. Small enough to move quickly, yet they must be large enough to avoid being the target of attacks, but if they are attacked, they must have a decent number of members to be able to defend themselves.

My proposal to the Board is clear and it is the only valid one. "No one can change destiny". Twenty groups of five hundred people. We will send eighteen groups in different directions. Each group will take a route with a separation angle of 20° with the former group. Two groups will remain at the base. Technicians have managed to establish HF and VLF radio contact with locations almost all over the world. As far as we know, we are not in the worst situation. Outage and chaos are the general guidelines but, on top of that, Africa, the Middle East and almost all of Europe are mired in a bloody war. We should try to establish contact with governments that still remain in place, or with other corporations. Those who remain in the headquarters will have a main objective, to try to join forces with other resistance groups and jointly define a scheme for a new world organization.

The population will be decimated before we are able to reorganize anything. Material losses won't be quantifiable, but as long as we manage to safeguard the knowledge and establish strict control systems over the

population, we should be able to start over and mend the previous model's errors. The model is dead.

There is so much to do and I feel so alone. My proposal will be the last thing voted by the Board, I will send each of the board members with an exploration group. A wise man to guide them in their exodus. That way I get rid of a hindrance in the decision making process, no more consensus with tired and outdated minds who have failed to respond to change. We are living the end of a civilization and the new one, which is still to be defined, cannot inherit habits and hypocrisies from the previous one.

* * *

Kismayo, Somalia

Could it be possible that I have travelled in time? That all this upheaval has taken me to another age? If it wasn't for the other prisoners I would be sure I've lost my mind, but they are in my reality. In the common nightmare. We are in a slave market.

Again in the truck. Based on the heat and brightness it must be daytime, but it's impossible to know how many days have gone by. How many days since I descended to hell. We left Zanzibar by boat, after the orgy of blood and pain. At least five women of the ones around the fire, died on the boat that brought us to the mainland. They bled to death. All five were in the group of fugitives. Seven tried to flee. They got mutilated. Left foot, right hand. Two of them must have died on the island. They never made it onboard. The other five, lasted for a couple of hours. Before setting sail they were dead. We would have tried to move their bodies away from ours. We would have tried to put distance between the flies, the stench and us, but we had been chained. I do not know how many days we spent there. We were sailing for much longer than it usually takes to get by boat to Daar es Salaam, to the mainland. All of us, without exception, urinated, vomited and defecated several times during the voyage. We were still naked. We could not move, so we did it all over our bodies. The smell was so nauseating that every so often someone would vomit again. Some vomited blood. Others only bile. Some lost consciousness, others slept. But restful moments were short. Soon after drifting away from reality, they would have fits and wake up screaming,

drenched in sweat. Reliving the horror, realizing that the nightmare was real, that it kept on going.

We disembarked, but we weren't in Tanzania any longer. I know all the ports where a boat of our size could dock in Tanzania and this place was not one of them. One of the few signs with Western characters told me we were in Kismayo. It could be Somalia. Perhaps all this was a pirate attack by Somalis asking for a ransom.

When we got off the boat, they walked us through the streets of the city. People circled around us. They shouted. They pushed us. We were insulted, spat at. They laughed at our nakedness, at our dirt. The kids threw stones or whatever else they had on hand. We walked for over an hour through the streets of the city. We were the incarnation of evil. Public derision.

Along the streets there were signs of struggle. Still smouldering piles of bodies. Remains of executions. Pools of blood. It smelled of death, but the atmosphere was festive. With a taste of triumphalism.

In a bus garage, they pounced pressurized water on us. We were so weak that we fell to the ground, after which they threw the contents of several garbage cans over our lying bodies. Our food. I would have liked not to eat, but I do not know how many days I had gone without any food. Instinct made me dig through the trash and I managed to find edible leftovers. I ate and licked the puddles that were left on the floor by the pressure shower. We were not given a lot of time, they soon pulled on our chains and crammed us in a cattle truck, identical to all the other trucks we were following. We had become meat and it seemed as if state in which the cargo arrived at the final destination was of no consequence.

The rattle of the truck and fatigue made me sleep. I dreamed of the sea. With crystal clear fresh waters that cleaned my body, that rocked me. I dreamed of Julién and Salma. I heard their laughter. I felt their cuddles, their warmth, their love. There, in my dreams, I felt I was a human being again. For the first time since the chaos began, I cried. The nightmare would end and although nothing would be the same as before, I must not lose hope. We had all lost it. Many would not stop banging their heads against the walls of the truck or against the ground. They were trying to kill themselves. I had the same idea. Why stay alive? The best thing was to put an end to all this as soon as possible. We were not prepared for so much pain, so much suffering.

I did not try to kill myself because I did not find a way that guaranteed my death.

We travelled nonstop for several days. There was light and darkness. Stifling heat and cold nights. As the sun was going down one day, we approached a town. It was noisy. From the minarets we could hear the call to worship. They were calling the fourth Salah^z, the Maghrib⁸. That meant that

the twilight was falling. They did not get us off the truck until they finished praying. When they had finished, we heard more messages through the loudspeakers of the minarets. Despite having spent four years studying Arabic, I never got to the level of understanding a full conversation and right now I really regretted it. I didn't know if the others were even listening, if they were able to speak, if they had still contact with the reality that surrounded us. I asked if anyone spoke Arabic. I got no answer.

The minarets were not used for any purpose other than to call to prayer. If they were sending messages over the intercom of the minarets, it meant that this was the only way they had to communicate with the citizens.

We got off the truck at another bus station. Before being thrown onto a hangar, I could see a poster, it read "*Ethiopian National Theatre*". We were in Ethiopia, probably in Addis Ababa.

* * *

Guadalajara, Spain

"Wake up! There are lights on the other shore. They are making signals. I think they know we're here. We can't get away, so take anything that could be used as a weapon and pray that they are not muzzies".

I still have two hours of guard duty at the worst shift; the second. It feels like you've just fallen asleep when you're woken for your watch. I am still half asleep and without coffee, I try to keep awake with water, but fatigue is tricky. It's hard not to close your eyes, having a snooze during your watch can mean our death. I have to stay awake. I have to keep alive. I can't screw it up.

Since we left Madrid behind, we've walked from dusk to dawn and we've rested during the day. Twelve hours on, twelve hours off. We take on three-hour shifts, not too long or too short to need to do double shifts. Four in the group, Jose, Pedro, Maria and myself. Four shifts. I still wonder whether the group escape was the best option, especially one including a woman, but considering our track record so far, it doesn't seem that bad. I mean the group, not the woman thing. Maria seems to be a good sport. So far she hasn't said "Go slower, I can't follow you", "I need you to help me", "I can't do it on my own"..., or anything girly of the sort once.

We managed to leave Madrid and five days later, we're still alive. What I don't know is for how long we'll manage to stay alive.

Reaching the Vellon area, north of the city, took us well over two days. The fear of being seen or captured drove us to be so careful that I thought we'd never make it. We left without food, without water, without telling

anyone. Every hour we spent there, we could see the army losing ground. We fled like rats. In my case, just as the rats do, I like life. I don't feel guilty. We couldn't all flee together. If we'd stayed, we would've been busted. Our own army would have also cut our way, so our goal was to avoid any contact with another human being. No sleeping, always on guard, the four of us, 48 hours awake, alert, without food, without water... It's amazing what adrenaline can do to your body! You almost feel like a superhero, invincible, indefatigable, ethereal... Until the adrenaline shot is exhausted and fatigue sinks in.

Maria was the most methodical and rational of the four. She established the watch system when she realized that we couldn't keep on going without a break. When we finally stopped, we lost the whole day. We needed to rest, regain strength. We made it to the Jarama River and drank some water. We turned some plastic bottles that littered the forest into our personal water bottles. We each keep our bottle as our most precious treasure. I don't know what I'd do if one of them asked me for a drink. Each one is responsible for his own supply. I think I wouldn't share it. Or maybe I would. If I said no, but others offered their water, they would all turn against me. Maybe I'd be left out of the group. I don't know. If it comes to that I'll keep my mouth shut. Let the others do the talking and if they're all into sharing I'll also offer to share mine. If we decide not to share, whoever runs out of water can bugger off! Like when we reached the Jarama. They were all shit scared about the water being poisoned. 'No, we better not drink', 'Yeah, but if we don't drink we'll die of thirst anyway', 'Who's gonna be the first to try it?', 'Let's draw straws'. Bullshit. I drank first, no draws, no nonsense. After a while, they almost drank the river dry. Hey, I need to cool down, let go of any negative thoughts. We're all in this together. We're a team. The closest thing to a family, in these motherfucking times we are living. There is only one enemy, and he's not here with us. As it turned out, the bastards hadn't poisoned lakes and rivers, but they managed to seed doubt. That's even better than devising a plan that would've left them nearly as fucked up as it would've left us.

With food we seem to be striking luck. If all this crap had happened in winter, we would've been really screwed. But as it turns out, we don't have to walk more than two or three miles to find some veg garden or fruit plantation. Unfortunately the Jarama won't take us up the Pyrenees, What's worse, I think tomorrow we'll be leaving the Jarama riverbanks to continue north to Majaelrayo area. Along the way, we've picked up plastic bags and have turned them into our own backpacks. We each collect what we find to have food for at least a week. It's all green. No matter how much you eat, and we don't eat that much, it always feels like you're running on an empty stomach. What if any of them asks me for part of my food? I better not start with that shit again.

We haven't contemplated hunting or fishing. We've all agreed not to light a fire. We travel by night and at daylight, the smoke from a fire would betray our position for miles around. If things get worse we'll have time to eat raw meat, animal or human if that's all we find. In just a few days I have become a bag of bones. Damn it! My ribs have swollen. I need only to look at the faces of exhaustion and weariness of my colleagues, to get an idea of how I must look.

We hardly talk. Each one is absorbed in his or her own thoughts, in his or her suffering. Thinking about what we've lost, what we've left behind. In the death and chaos that are eating Spain. We walk in silence. We eat in silence. We live in fucking silence. The day we stopped to rest, we all agreed on the route to follow. Northbound to France. We all agreed that things would be better there and we could seek asylum and refuge. When Jose was training for the Ironman, he did a lot of hiking and biking on the highlands. He knows all the off-road tracks fairly well. He is the one that headed the group. We followed him without any question. If at some point we have to communicate, we do it by signs.

That day of rest, before agreeing on the plan and the path to follow, we talked. We had talked before, how to organize the escape, the great conspiracy. While preparing it all, I remember a continuous feeling of wanting to shit. The four of us were, literally, shit scared.

Until we had stopped, we had not said one more word about it. When we did, we were not at our best. The fatigue and the shock of what we had seen during the previous days had left us like complete asses. None of us was lucid or capable, we couldn't think straight and far less reach any brilliant conclusion about the shit surrounding us. What we all agreed on was that an Islamist movement had planned and organized for several months the conquest of Spain. At least long enough to pull down the country's power supply on the day chosen for the invasion. The dramatic effect of the total loss of power has plunged us into chaos and caught the army and government with their pants down. They seemed to be fully organized and armed to their teeth. The plan was clear and the bastards had executed it to perfection. How many towel-heads lived in Spain? There had to be millions. They didn't even need to bring outside troops. Those living in Spain, as a fucking Trojan horse, were those who had done it all. What we couldn't figure out was why Spain had not received any help from the outside, why were we alone? I've never liked to be the shit-stirrer in any group and I won't be starting now, but maybe in France, they are no better off than us. They have their own Trojan horse...

... and Germany

... and Italy

... and Austria, and ...

I won't be the shit-stirrer.

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

Oxford Dictionary

Claustrophobia (from Lat. Clastrum, confinement and phobia):

An abnormal fear of being in enclosed or narrow places.

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People who suffer claustrophobia are not afraid of the enclosure itself, but of the negative consequences of being in it, for example remaining locked up forever or asphyxia due to their belief that there is not enough air.

Mark had been preparing the bunker for five years. He started a few weeks after buying the land. He had brought by himself, with a rented truck, the container in which he had built it. I remember asking him about the trailer, but I don't remember his answer. Whatever it was, quelled my curiosity.

It was vital that no one knew the location of our shelter, so he couldn't use any outside workers. That way, he prevented any outsider from having the coordinates, a fact that would have allowed them to come to the shelter at any time and grab all the supplies that were permanently stored in it. On top of that, if anyone knew of its existence, in an emergency, if we really needed to use it, our lives would be endangered.

With a little backhoe, which we had rented for months (I thought for the construction of our house, the terraces for the veg patch, the orchard, the woodworking area...), he dug the hole to bury the container and prepared the

pit for the septic tank of the bunker. He began by installing the ventilation system and attached a camouflaged periscope to the main structure. With this done, he proceeded to bury the whole container and kept upgrading it over the years.

The bunker had a dual system of energy supply. On one hand, the main supply was the connection to the energy generated in the house. The solar panels and the generators not only fed the house, but also the bunker. Mark explained to me how he had managed to conceal the fork in the wiring so that if someone were to come to our house, while we were in the bunker, they would not be able to see where we were. I could hardly understand what he explained, what was happening. It was hard to accept that Mark, my husband, with whom I thought I had no secrets, had been hiding something like this for over five years. I wondered how I hadn't realized. Putting all of it together must have taken him a long time. How could I have been so absorbed, as not to realize that Mark was holding two projects in parallel? Ours, the family life, and the paramilitary paranoia to which we had been pushed to, which was responsible for our lockup; the lockup of my kids, myself, our lives.

The other energy source was an electrical generator. He also detailed the list of benefits; low decibels emission level while running, soundproof, cushioning system. He explained how he had installed an ad-hoc ventilation system for it, which would be impossible to detect from the outside once the generator was working.

40'x8'x9.6'. 40'x8'x9.6'. That was the size of the freight container he chose. It is a high cube, the larger size, the highest, that's why he chose it. Big enough for transporting wine, cheese, weapons, but not to live in it. We are locked in a volume of twenty seven hundred cubic feet, an area slightly larger than three hundred square feet. High Cube. I don't know where the nine and a half feet went. I guess they were lost in the isolation, the ventilation pipes... Our ceiling isn't even seven feet high. Mark's head almost touches it and I only have about a foot above me. The ceiling feels as if it's going to fall on me, it seems so heavy, I can't breathe. I won't be able to leave for five months. I can't do it. My husband has buried me alive... Breathe. Deeply. Very deep breaths. I'm starting to hyperventilate. My anxiety has risen to the sky and my stress is worse than ever. At least it seems it's only me. The children cried when the hatch was closed and the bunker was sealed. We were in total darkness until the lighting system came in. Mark had prepared a colourful play area for them, with a smooth carpet, beanbags, all kinds of toys, books, music... They calmed down pretty fast and it seems they have accepted the enclosure quite well. Every morning Mark and Patrick practice tai-chi before starting Patrick's homeschooling, while Rachel plays in her playpen. She will be walking shortly. When she grows up we will tell her, "you took your first steps in a bunker, ten feet below the ground, where your father locked us the

day he thought the Third World War had started, the place where he buried us alive".

When they finish studying, the three of them prepare their meal. We have a kitchen with a small fire to warm up the food, but we can't really cook. Mark has stocked up the bunker so that there's food for the four of us for at least 8 months. Mainly there are cans, cookies and sacks and sacks of semolina. A glass of boiling water, they simmer the semolina and mix it with whatever canned food they have chosen which has been previously heated with a '*baine marie*'. There are filters in the outside ventilation system, we can't take the risk of cooking anything with an excessively strong smell.

I hardly eat anything. Since Mark closed up, anxiety seizes me. Most of the time I'm in bed. When I get up, I walk from one side to the other, like a caged animal. Every single day, Mark tries to get me to practice tai-chi, but I can't. My body burns, shudders, shivers or breaks down in a sweat.

After cleaning up the meals, they play chess or any other board game. They end up watching a movie or reading a book at bedtime. Day after day. Without further reference of the passing time, of the hours, the days, but the routine that Mark has designed. What if that group was wrong? What if we haven't been attacked and we have still gone ahead with this ridiculous self-burial? What if Mark has gone raving nuts?

I can't breathe, I need to get out. I run to the sealed door and try to open it. I can't. I start punching the door. I scream... A sharp pain in my neck. I feel a strange torpor. My body feels heavy. Everything becomes a blur. I fall into a pit of darkness... Mark's briefcase. He has used it.

Bastard.

* * *

Thursday, July 29th

Tokyo, Japan

Ikkyu, the Zen master, was very clever even as a boy. His teacher had a precious teacup, a rare antique. Ikkyu happened to break this cup and was greatly perplexed. Hearing his teacher's footsteps, he held the pieces of the cup behind him. When the master appeared, Ikkyu asked:

"Why do people have to die?"

"It is the natural course," explained the older man. "Everything has to die as everything is finite."

Ikkyu, revealing the shattered cup, added: "It was time for your cup to die".

To dissolve the Board and to maintain a hidden reserve of provisions are the two most successful strategic decisions I have taken since the 12th. Now we do not have to reach consensus. Democracy was not born in times of crisis and it is definitely not the best system for taking decisions right now.

Now I'm the leader of the corporation. My goal remains the same. My corporation's core values are also mine; extend the wings and cover the world. If the corporation does not grow, the family will not survive. Survival is what we pursue. We live in a small country. We do not have rich natural resources. Our wealth lies within us. In our strength. In our will. I must guarantee the survival of the highest number of members of the corporation. I have to succeed in extending our power. I have the opportunity to position Tyo in a place that it would have never imagined possible. I can turn our

corporation into one of the world leaders. I can be part of the creation of a new world order. All my decisions, all our resources and our efforts should be focused on achieving those goals. In the short term, work performed by the restoration team as well as by the raid teams is key.

Before organizing the scouting parties, who left last week, I selected the best engineers to form the restoration team. They are the elite, the best. They could not leave. They have to remain here at the headquarters. Our top professionals. A multidisciplinary team with one mission, to solve the energy problem. They are the most creative, those who accumulate more knowledge, the most methodical and the most disciplined. Their work is already underway. They seem to have identified the source. A computer virus that spreads, feeding off the energy carried through the grid. They are having difficulties in designing an antivirus to eliminate or at least block it, to isolate it. They are good engineers, sooner or later they will find the solution, because as the saying goes, "every problem has a solution; otherwise, it is not a problem". If Tyo succeeds in creating the antivirus, we will be in an unprecedented hegemonic position. We will have the key to restore the access to electricity in all the countries, in the world. The key to impose a new order. Our order. That is the key to power.

Moreover, since the exploration groups left, and took the Board with them, the raiding teams have begun to operate. They do not always find food, but they have gathered a lot of weapons and information. The situation in Tokyo is dramatic. People kill for food, which of course, has led to several casualties in our teams. The Army cannot maintain order. Raid teams report that there were dead bodies everywhere. The heat does not help. There are rotting corpses on every street. Diseases have found an optimal growth medium in the dead and rotting bodies.

I have limited the access of the raid teams to the ground floor. They report the results of each expedition directly to me, always through the internal telephone system of the building. Without direct contact. They could also be infected. There were a hundred the first day, there are only 70 left. Their sacrifice is not in vain, they all know it and any of those who are not currently on the ground floor would join the squads immediately without hesitation if I were to ask for new volunteers, something that will happen soon enough, taking into account the casualty rate we are bearing.

They have managed to contact many of the embassies in the area. This is highly productive information. The embassies of the US, Canada, Sweden, Australia, Finland, Brazil, Argentina, Russia and China, are still operative. Not all of them were as lucky. France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been looted. There is not anyone or anything that may be of any use.

They have not been able to contact any of the embassies out of Minato⁹. Scouring long distances in the city entails a risk that for the moment we cannot afford.

We have opened an HF communication channel with all the embassies that are still alive. We have given them an entry one by one. Finally, yesterday the last two came through; Brazil and Argentina. Almost all of them have been able to establish radio contact with their home countries.

Canada and the United States go hand in hand. As soon as the state of emergency was declared in their countries, the highest echelons of the Government were moved to a safe place. From wherever they are, they try to infuse some sanity to the madness that blights their lands. The Army, as is the case here, fails to maintain order. Deaths get multiplied. There is no food. Large cities do not have running water, except in specific areas, where the topography helps with natural slopes of the falling water. The whole of America has suffered the same power failure we have in Japan. They are also unable to restore power. The operational centres that had alternative energy sources continue to operate under strict military or paramilitary control. As we have been reported, there are some corporations with contingency plans similar to ours that, just as we've done, have grouped some of their workers at their headquarters. I think those two embassies have a satellite contact with their countries. They were not clear over this point. But I suspect so.

The embassies of Sweden and Finland were the next to come through the radio channel. Their countries are lucky. Their power supply is also out, but they have a very small population. Between the two of them, they do not add more than fourteen million people. That makes it easy to manage the crisis. They have managed to handle and, more or less, organize and restrain the urban population. Those who live far away from large cities are totally uninformed, disconnected and without any Government support. The good news is that almost all the population has its own power generating systems and is immersed in a natural environment that, if it remains iceless, would help them survive.

Australia. Another lucky country. Only twenty-two million people in an area almost twenty times larger than Japan. If we could evacuate half of our population over there, they would have a chance of surviving. But for the moment, thinking about evacuation movements is outside any feasible option. The embassy could not give too much information. Their country is sizable. They have only been able to contact Sydney. The city is wracked by chaos. They have to add to the power failure a particularly cold winter. Climate change has caused extreme worldwide weather conditions. The temperature in the last week has hardly risen above thirty degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of the day. During the nights they have gone below that. They estimate that more than one third of the population has died and another third has fled out of town. The leaders of the Government have

fallen. They have established contact with some politicians that are entrenched in the Parliament. They do not have a direction, but for our purposes, their embassy in Japan and the entrenched politicians are still a valid representation of their Government. An advantageous situation for us, whenever negotiations actually begin.

Russia. The largest country on the planet. Its Government has also been evacuated. It seems they are somewhere in Siberia. I do not know why the Embassy declassifies such information. They are in some old diamond mine, which had been converted over the last few years into a fully self-sufficient underground city. Not just energy-sufficient but food-sufficient through hydroponics and vertical farms. The political elite are hiding there while chaos ravages its vast geography. The Army is falling apart. Too many fronts for an Army that does not see a clear commitment in the command, who flees and takes refuge in a place far away from the many open conflicts the country has. It is only a matter of time before the Army disintegrates and forms groups of guerrillas, paramilitary commandos. They would rampage any territory in their path. They have weapons. The civilian population does not. The same will happen in the US and Canada. Perhaps it will take a little bit longer there. But the absence of Governmental presence, coupled with the lack of food for the military and their families, will be the trigger for the disintegration of the Army or perhaps the beginning of a totalitarian Government controlled by the army.

Same in China. The Army had more power there than in the other countries before all this began. Its geography may help some people to survive. However, its population density will be a problem. It will not help a hyper-centralized government to maintain control. Not without a good system of communications and transport. How many millions of Chinese have probably died? The embassy has not given us much information. They are a cliquey society. They would never talk about their suffering. But it is easy to read between the lines. Beijing, twenty-two million people without food, without electricity or drinking water. The city will fall if it has not already fallen. Like Canton, Tianjin and Shenyang. All the Chinese power lies in the Army and now it has more work than they can handle. It will be difficult to enter into negotiations with them, but sooner or later, they will ask for help and at that time, it must be Japan who provides a solution.

The strangest news came from the contacts we opened yesterday with the Embassy of Argentina and Brazil. It seems they are making a comeback from the ashes of chaos, faster than the rest and without having found the antivirus. Our interlocutors at the embassies have not been able to explain clearly what is happening in their countries. They speak of a common consciousness that has aroused within the population. A collective movement of support, cooperation. An organization that does not come from a command centre. A spontaneous movement among the population.

Governments have been overthrown, the Army has been dissolved, and the population has allowed the city to return to nature. They have got organized in small communities. How did they call them? Resilient communities. The contact both embassies have with their home countries, is through one of those communities. They say the Earth, they called it Gaia, speaks to them, that they have entered into communion with the environment, with their kind, that they have to restore the natural order, that the embassies should convey that message to the world. I do not know if they really think anyone in their right mind will give them some kind of credit. What has to be done is to restore the electrical power and set a new world order led by those who have the knowledge, by corporations. However, South America does not play a key role. They can keep playing tribes. We will take care of their natural resources when we solve everything else.

If we manage to bring together the forces from Russia, Canada, US, China and Australia, or what remains of the representation of these countries, we would gather more than one third of the inhabited surface of the planet. That is more than enough to outline the new rules.

The Government in Japan has also fallen. The prime minister, along with several of his ministers, was intercepted in a transfer. The mob managed to break the police cord. They lynched them. They made them responsible for the situation in the country. One of our raid groups saw the riot and decided to go to the Imperial Palace to check their situation. They brought sad news for Japan. The palace had been looted and the entire imperial family murdered. Who could have committed such a heinous crime? The raid team split up, to get more information about what had happened. A group of monks, near the Forbidden City, confirmed that they had buried the entire imperial family in the Meiji Shrine. That leaves us without any kind of Government, at the mercy of the Army and our Army will suffer the same fate as the American or the Russian one. Japan has also lost its way. The Western world adrift. We are living the end of an era. "Everything has to die, as everything is finite". The civilization that we have known and lived for the last century has died. It is our duty to build a new civilization. A new knowledge-driven organization, guided through efficiency, responsibility and dedication to the common good, the good of the world order.

States as we understood them until today are in their last throes. Someone must take over. We, the corporations must take that relay. We can lead the new movement. We must lead it or Humanity would either recede centuries or perish.

Uthy and Coperx are with us. It is easier to establish alliances with old acquaintances rather than with foreigners. Contact with them was easy. It was also the first. They needed renewed strength, just like us. Unity means strength. Its headquarters are the only in the Minato area that have been left untouched, aside from ours. The rest have been ransacked.

Uthy... Uthy is a good ally. They are good in robotics. And now is the time when they will be indispensable, not because of an aged population but because much of the population will have died.

* * *

Rabak, Sudan

The river flows, it gets lost in the horizon, as does my mind. My thoughts take me far away, far from this strange land. Seeking inwardly is my only anchor to remaining alive. Uncertainty is my only certainty. My future is written in Arabic, but I cannot understand what it says.

Addis Ababa was a freight stop. Just as they did in Kismayo, they unloaded us in a bus depot, washed us with pressurized water and threw our food on the floor. We were still naked, dirty, hungry, scared, thirsty and oblivious to what was happening. This time they added another twenty women to our truck load, one of them was French like me. She sat in front of me, chained to the rest of her group of women. She was talking to herself, out loud. She kept saying over and over that everyone had died. That they had been murdered. That they had done nothing wrong. They hadn't attacked them, they hadn't even offended them. It was all a big mistake. It took her a while to hear me asking her what her name was. I think she was in denial, she couldn't take in that I, or the truck, or everything else around her was real. Her name was Chloé. She was a paediatrician. She worked for Doctors without Borders. Her former colleagues had killed the other Europeans working at her base camp. She was the only white woman in the area where they worked. They had raped her, as did the military that followed, the truck drivers and whoever else had fancied so. She was holding her left arm. They had broken it when she tried to resist. Her eyes were wells of pain. I suppose all the others showed it as well. But Chloé was the only one I had exchanged glances with.

The following day we stopped in another city. Fifteen new women were loaded on the truck. We were squashed. Some of us were sitting, the others laid on top of the ones sitting. Many had deep wounds. Broken bones. Some vomited blood. Many of the women in the truck were in the throes of death. They would pass away. It was just a matter of days and the results of the lack of medical assistance, hygiene, water and food.

The days would fade and the nights arrived. All the trucks stopped five times throughout the day for the Salah. Their prayers, coupled with the light or lack of it, were my only indications for the passing of time. We were not allowed out. We were unfaithful freight.

Since we left Addis Ababa we have been given no food. They left two water barrels in each truck. Rancid water, which smelled rotten. The same smell as the community ladle with which we shared it.

I reckon it was on the fifth day when they let us out of the truck again. We were in a city in the desert. The few signs I would see on the streets were written in Arabic. They unloaded us in a street alley. The ground was pressed soil and the houses were made of adobe. The rhythm, the repetition of sounds, the increasingly higher intonation at the end of sentences, made me think it was a market, an auction.

Some women approached us with basins and some sort of sponges, with which we were scrubbed after being unchained. It was the closest thing to a bath in this deserted town. They were cleaning us up prior to our being inspected by a man who, most likely, was one of the chiefs of wherever we were. He walked a few steps behind them. Four men followed him. He carried a crop with which he lifted the heads of the women he inspected. The crop was also used to open wounds, elicit screams of pain when being dug into the broken bones, whip those who were not standing and indicate his henchmen where he wanted each one placed.

They made four groups. One of them was comprised of the women in the worst shape. Some could not even stand up. Another group gathered the ones that were injured or had minor fractures and the other two groups, I believe they followed aesthetics or age criteria. The younger, with better looks, and the more mature, with worse looks. I fell into the latter. I am not sure if it was because of my age, or due to the scars that Johari had left all over my body or because, at this point, I had become an old bag of bones, utterly useless.

They led the first group into the trucks again and they took off. Probably headed to a common grave in the middle of the desert. The second group was led to walk to the other side of the houses, from where the voice came. Chloé was in this one. She looked at me again while they were taking her away. Tears from her green, glassy eyes were streaming down her face leaving a black trail on her cheeks. We heard a murmur, whistles and a bunch of

intertwined words, with the person that said them seeming almost suffocated. Different voices. Short sentences. Once again the baritone that guided the whole process and preceded other voices. All of them male. They were auctioning the women they had just taken. I do not know if they were being sold one by one or all in a pack. It had to be an auction.

It was over soon. They came back for my group. They took us to the square. They had built an elevated structure in the centre. They made us walk up some rudimentary steps made out of concrete and they set us in a line. The bidding commenced. The square was packed with men shouting, whistling and approaching to touch us. We were all still naked. Without any shame, they felt our breasts, our buttocks, or slid their hand between our legs. The one shouting displayed his merchandise, one by one. He made us turn on our feet, pointed at our hair, our legs, our face..., while bellowing incomprehensible sentences, which seemed to crack up the audience.

It did not take him long to sell the whole group. I was the last one. My bid was granted to a man dressed in a white tunic, a belt with a sword and marked Arab features: dark skin, grey, curly, long hair, showing below his turban. It reminded me of an old lion's mane.

Again, I walked down the concrete steps. One of the military men organizing the groups of women tied my wrists together with a rope and gave the other end to the man who had become my owner, who did not even look at me. He exchanged some conversation with the military man and when he started walking he pulled on the rope to make me follow him. He took me to the outskirts of town. He dressed me in a black tunic and some kind of colourful blanket that he placed around my head. The hot temperature, hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain..., hit me all at once. I thought I was going to faint. It must have been midday. The sun was at its highest. I had not had any food for days. Very little water. I had been sold. My strength flagged. It could not be true. I was in the middle of the desert. I did not even know in what country. I could not understand the language they spoke. I did not know where they were taking me. A strange old man had bought me. I had become his slave.

* * *

La Rioja, Spain

'If today is Wednesday this must be Urbasa wildlife park'. That's as far as Pedro's airhead orientation prowess will go. My vote goes to get rid of him.

I'm fucking wasted. I can't keep up this pace. I reckon we are doing twenty miles cross-country daily. The meat we got at the canyon was gone three days ago, when we crossed from Soria to La Rioja. From the Mansilla dam onwards we've been following the river Urbion, where there're plenty of vegetable and fruit groves but I need something richer, meat, cheese, bread, something warm. I need a new pair of shoes, a fleece. At night, even walking, I feel cold despite this being the middle of the summer. I need to rest.

We're all edgy. Crossing the Iberian mountains has been fucking hard. The camaraderie and good vibes have been lost fast after we left the Rio Lobos canyon. Crossing the canyon was really something. When we finally saw them they had been watching us for hours. We figured the road crossing the canyon had been taken, so we decided to enter the canyon further south, near Navafría de Ucero. We reached the river at dawn. The sun had not yet risen over the horizon. The canyon is full of caves. It didn't take long to choose one. We picked the first one that appeared more or less out of sight. We were exhausted, just like every fucking night since we left Madrid. It was Maria's watch. She woke us up less than an hour after she started it. She had seen lights at about 100 yards. No noise. Just some lights that appeared and disappeared from the other bank of the river. We grabbed some sticks. I doubt they would have been of any use had we really had to use them! Out of nowhere they were on us. Ten. They were not muzzies. We were all silent.

They were armed with knives, hoes, and hunting rifles. We must have been silent for five seconds or five minutes. To me it seemed like five hours. They wanted to know what we were doing there. If we were alone. If we had seen anyone along the way. If we had come across any armed group. Jose answered. To the point. Short and calm. He kicks-ass. Soon the tension dropped a knot. They asked us to follow them to their camp. We were in an exposed area and a Muslim patrol could spot us. We had to go there anyway so we decided to follow nicely along.

They were from Soria. They knew that canyon inch by inch. They guided us to a woodland. Hidden behind a rift in the canyon, hardly perceptible. We reached a huge crevice in the trees. They had managed to bring over plenty of things, blankets, sleeping bags, firewood, all kinds of tools and hardware, sacks of flour, tin cans, drinks, preserved meats, they even had a couple of hens and a cow.

For the first time in many days we had something warm to eat. They said it was coffee. To me it looked like dirty water but at least it was warm. A real treat denied to us for too long.

We told them about our trek from Madrid. What we had seen there, the deaths, the chaos, the executions, how our Army was losing ground day after day, the inevitable fall of the city in foreign hands. We explained our theory about the long planned and well organized invasion of Al-Andalus, and we even told them about our plans to cross the Pyrenees and reach French soil, were we thought we would be safe. Well, I didn't believe so but that was the plan.

Their story and how they got to this camp was very much like ours. They held the idea that Spain had fallen to an Islamic army but they were convinced that it was something temporary. For that reason they had decided to find some hidden spot and hold on. They wanted to resist until our country received some outside help. Sooner or later the allies would come to help us. They wanted to be part of the resistance. They wanted to avenge their dead. Three of them had lost their children and wives on the first day of the attack.

They were well prepared. They could survive on what they had for months. It would be almost impossible to find them if they didn't want to be seen.

They were the first people we had talked to in over one week. We all were invaded by a nostalgic feeling. In no time we were bound by a feeling of camaraderie which I had never before experienced with the people with whom I had worked or gone to school. Hardship drew us together with stronger bonds than bullshit, superficiality or convention. Survival instinct united us. To face a common enemy.

That day they brought in game. They had set-up traps along the canyon. We ate braised rabbit. We talked around the campfire until sundown. They invited us to stay with them. Help from the outside would be arriving soon. We would get rid of the muzzies. We had already done it 500 years ago. We would do it again. Spain would be as it was. There with them, we would be safe. We could help them. Together our chances of survival would be greater.

I must admit I was tempted. We all felt tempted but none of us thought help was on its way, and nothing would be as it was. Staying there was like staying in a mousetrap. If they wanted to resist they could do so from France. They could come with us.

We didn't join their group and they didn't join ours. They shared some of their provisions with us. They gave us bread, meat preserves and cheese to last two or three days. Furthermore, they gave us what became our most precious goods; a buck knife that Maria carried and a rifle with a box of ammo. Pedro was a hunter. A straight shooter he said. He would hold the gun steady should there be any need to use it. It never left his side. In return, we would take turns at carrying his backpack. The rifle and the closeness to his land, which he knows better than anybody, had made him so full of himself that I feel like I want to punch him hard. He assures us that he knows Navarre like the palm of his hand and I don't really know how he's done it but he's become the self-appointed guide from tomorrow on.

Jose has guided us so far like as a fucking GPS, we'll see if Pedro is half as able of leading us to the Pyrenees of Nafarroa.

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

I can live through their lives. In my imprisonment. They have everything I want. If I watch them, I can imagine it's me who is out there. Laughing. Running. Feeling the wind in my hair. The sun on my face. The rain soaking my body. Smelling the forest, the freedom. They are my window to life.

The first jab was not a unique event. For more than a week my anxiety levels soared. Each time I came out from my lethargy I functioned in slow movement, with a dull head, not quite knowing where I was. It took me a while to get back to my regular sharp sight, but as soon as I could scan the space around me, I could also remember that I was shut up in a container. Buried alive by my psychopath husband. Underground. Along with my two children. I sat up. Dizzy. Nauseous. Weak. Still with the need to escape, to head out to the surface, to get a gulp of fresh air, to gaze at the sunlight.

I used to use my remaining strength to crawl to the sealed door, to hit it. Mark always followed me, a few steps behind. He would talk to me. I think he was trying to reason with me. To calm me down. I wasn't able to understand a word. In my head rang the sound of the bunker being sealed. A creak and a big slam that multiplied inside my head, thanks to the echo of my own silence. The silence in which I had been isolated. I couldn't breathe.

I think I screamed. I hit whatever was nearby. I heard a voice in the background, saying he didn't want to have to inject any more tranquilizers. That I had to eat something. That I needed to get hydrated. The creak. The

slamming door. That he was there to help me. Lies! It always ended the same way. A new shot. A new journey into the pit of darkness.

When I was drugged, I always had the same nightmare. I was buried. My nose to ground level, with the nostrils half engulfed. My lips half-open to gasp for some air. The rest of the body buried. My hands far away, under tons of land that won't let me move them. I can't bring them up to my face. I can't shake off the bugs that scurry around my eyes, my nose, my forehead, my mouth. The dream varies little from day to day. Sometimes, the soil is crumbly, blackish. Wet, with earthworms that aerate the soil that fills my mouth. Others the soil is dry. Desert sand, hot, fine, ashen. My throat burns. The sun roasts me. The vultures' cries can be heard as they fly over their next feast. Myself. A black scorpion injects its venom in me. Its spider face morphs into Mark's face. He looks at me with its eight eyes. My image is reflected in small glass octagons. I get multiplied but the venom makes me fall, makes me die and then, I wake up in another purdah. I am not covered with earth, but still, I can't breathe. And the nightmare, the real one, my confinement in the bunker, starts again.

* * *

Sunday, August 8th

Tokyo, Japan

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Gem	琛

A nobleman asked Takuan, a Zen Teacher, to suggest how he might pass his time. He felt his days very long attending his office and sitting stiffly to receive the homage of others.

Takuan wrote eight Chinese characters and gave them to the man:

"This day will never come back, every minute is a precious gem that is priceless".

Twenty-eight days. A sidereal month and a few hours. The time it takes the Moon to orbit Earth and return to the same position relative to the fixed stars of the celestial sphere.

Twenty-eight days without energy. The restoration team has not achieved anything stable yet. They manage to confine the virus in the lab working area. They neutralized it in a closed network, no more than thirty feet long. As soon as they try with a longer cable, the virus feeds back with such a strength that disintegrates the antivirus. They have to succeed. I just hope we can be first in doing so. We need that advantage for the negotiations.

The first contact overseas took place seven days ago. As our links at the Embassy told us, several US corporations have managed to survive. I do not know if it has been by accident that they have contacted us or whether it has been the result of the diplomatic corps efforts. Crynf was the one I thought most likely to remain alive and to have defined a restoration project. They have always been leaders. They led the major change on the Internet. They bet for innovation as their core business and in what they thought would be crucial in the future, energy. They have been investing for years in this field. It was foreseeable that they had assembled entirely self-operational centres in different countries. They entered through the HF channel, but I still think that from the US they have access and control over a satellite. It would be an important advantage in coordinating simultaneous actions over long distances. It would contribute with great value to whatever future alliance we sign with them.

We have already held four conferences. From the second onwards, Eric Prin and Chris Telley, the founders, joined us. They are clever. Meticulous. The rest of the management team has focused on the day-to-day tasks, which has allowed Eric and Chris the time to think about contingency planning, remote options but still feasible. During the last decade, they have directed much of the efforts of the company, or the foundation, or whatever vehicle they have used, to get prepared for an eventuality. They have managed to attract talent and when it was time to face the crucial moment, they had everything set in place to retain it. When the chaos began, they managed to bring together their best researchers, engineers and scientists at their Silicon Valley centre. They keep them there, sheltered and protected. Almost all Crynfgora, as they call their headquarters, is still operative, at least whatever runs within the premises. The service over the Internet, of course, does not work.

They are also working on the search for an antivirus. Fortunately for Tyo, so far they have not found it. As Voltaire said "a person is better known for his questions than for his answers". The questions are their business, they are experts. But experts or not, I am certain, based on their questions, they have not found it yet. Besides, if they had found it, they would not have invested their time with me over any of the following conferences.

Their information is valuable. It seems that the Government is losing share of power. They can no longer feed the military and their families. There are way too many. They are beginning to starve. Defections have begun, which has caused chaos to grow in their own country. As in Japan.

The defectors want to survive. They want food for themselves and their families. They want a security the Government is not be able to guarantee. They offer their services to the highest bidder, as militias, as mercenaries. In organized groups, with their ranks, knowledge and specialties already defined. The Crynf offices that are still operative in the US, those in Silicon

Valley, San Francisco, New York and Seattle, have managed to recruit the almighty military commands of the US Army, which is in an advanced decomposition process. They have joined the Crynf staff. More than a thousand former soldiers are now part of the corporation, with a clear goal, to protect Crynf's facilities, to protect the crynfies, its employees and above all, to protect the twenty people who run the corporation and their direct families.

Eric and Chris seem to have a master plan. I do not know how many years they have invested in creating it. Or if it is only the result of the blackout. I do not know if the plan has been devised in order to dominate the world, to make it a better place or just to enriched themselves, but they have a master plan and had thought out a contingency similar to what we are living. I do not have any doubt about it. I still have to make them share it with me. It may not be so far from my own interests. From my corporation's. From Humanity's.

We must seize the moment. Those who do survive the chaos will be in such a weak position, that they will accept any rules from whoever helps them recover a fraction of the comfort they once enjoyed. We can build a better world. Governments are falling under their own weight. We can start from scratch. We do not have to inherit the stupid borders, typical of medieval states. We aim for a global world. A world in which the political class does not exist, in which there are no corrupt Governments. A world where knowledge, efficiency, productivity, innovation, competition and creativity take priority. A world handled like a business. Managed by the large corporations that have survived the hecatomb of civilization. We will re-emerge from our ashes like a phoenix and we will be able to create a better world. A world without inefficiency.

* * *

Rabak, Sudan

We walked through the desert. I was too worn out to be able to follow the pace. Once again they have tied me up as if I were a bundle. Once again part of the freight. I am only allowed out at night, when they stop to set up the tents.

We embarked soon after I was bought. It was a freight ship, around fifty feet long. The part in the middle was covered with awnings made of some kind of animal skin, in a half-cylinder shape. They protected from the blazing sun. Only for the men.

Stuck to the canvas, right in the middle of the ship, stood the sole mast, with at least twenty rustic shrouds made of hemp sprouting out of it. At the top of the pole, serving as the boom, a long wood had an enormous lateen sail rolled around it. It was set by two ropes anchored to the tacks with some wooden pieces.

On the deck not covered by the awnings, towards the bow and the stem, they transported freight: bags, boxes, some goats, two pigs and me. I was the only woman on board. When I realized this fact, I re-lived the night in Zanzibar. I went into a convulsion, screaming. I cried, just from recalling the hell I lived through and fearing I would have to go through it again. I tried to jump into the river. One of the crew members stopped me and tied me up to the boxes that were closer to me. The man who had bought me came closer. He had a whip around his left hand. I realized he had unrolled it when I felt a sharp pain on my hand, followed by a loud cry.

They set sail and I started a new voyage. I did not know where I had embarked, nor where I was headed. I was a slave. Neither did I know what use they would make of me. The whipping had made it clear that wherever I ended up, whatever I ended up having to do, my owner would not put up with disobedience or insubordination.

Under the sun, covered with the tunic, the blanket, my bosom tied with ropes that anchored me to some boxes, I lost track of time. The boat sailed down the river. A gentle breeze pushed the craft. It whispered it would help me. It would swell up the sail to provide me with a shadow and prevent me from dying out of dehydration or from sunstroke in the first hours of our crossing. Maybe that was the best I could hope for. Drowsy, rocked by the movement of the boat, my mind started to travel across Africa's map. Our point of entry to the continent has taken place at Kismayoo, in the south of Somalia. From there we set towards the northwest, to reach Addis Ababa. We were then in the trucks for several days, I do not know in what direction we went. The scenery turned more and more arid while we travelled by land. Now, however, sailing down this river, the soil turned fertile once again. Where am I?

If my memory was correct, the main waterways in Africa were in the Congo, the Niger and the Nile. The river we were in could not be the Niger. Too far from Addis Ababa for the time we had been bound to the trucks. Furthermore, during the trip, the land would have been less arid. The Congo river was also far from Ethiopia, not as far as the Niger, but in that direction everything would have been greener. Most probably the river we were taking was the Nile or any of its tributaries. A slave in the Nile.

I was let out three times a day. I had a hard time standing up. The lack of movement had left my muscles numb and stiff from the ties. When I was untied, in order to get up I had to lay on all fours like an animal, like one of the pigs or goats running around the deck. From there, I would lean on the boxes around me to be able to sit on top of any one of them. The food I was given was frugal. A bowl no bigger than an orange, with rice or semolina that I ate with my fingers. Another bowl with water. The tunic and blanket suffocated me, but they were useful, they did not let out my perspiration. They placed a bucket next to me for my physiological needs. I could only go when I was untied. I sat on the bucket. I covered it with the tunic. The first time, when I was done, I picked it up and went up to the rail to empty it. "La! Yalla! Yalla!" My rudimentary Arabic knowledge and the gestures allowed me to understand. 'No! Move! Come on!' I had time to leave the bucket on the deck and go back to my place before I was whipped again.

At night I remained tied up, against the boxes, just as I did during the long days. My head rocked with the river, bending forward when I managed any deep sleep. My neck ached so badly I could hardly move it. I could not really move any of my muscles. I hardly got any sleep, neither during the day

nor at night. At night I took a break from the blazing sun. The sky was always clear, with a waning moon that allowed the stars to shine in their full might. The same stars that lit up my nights in Zanzibar, with my children, by the sea, in my dream of a slow and relaxed life, far from the Western world and its stressful pace. The life I searched for when Pierre and I separated. The paradise I wanted to build for my children and which ended up being their grave and my descent to hell. Had I stayed in Paris, none of this would have happened. They would still be alive. I would be a free woman. I would have never experienced this much pain.

The last sailing day the moon was almost new. The only lights in the sky were the stars. The river turned black. The banks, fuzzy from the dark, were filled with animal noises creating a somewhat disturbing environment. The night shared my uneasiness. But nobody, not even the night, could share the fear I felt. My loneliness. My anxiety. My hopelessness.

In the morning we arrived to a big city. My owner tied the rope around my hands again and pulled me up. At the disembarking dock I was able to see it was the confluence of two rivers. We walked through the city. It was buzzing. Still stiff, with slow movements, I followed my new owner. I looked for any sign that could indicate my location. I searched for a western face. Someone I could ask for help. At the market's entry I saw a sign with western writing. We were in Al-khurtum. Any westerner in the vicinity would be two feet under, just as any possibility of getting help.

* * *

Navarra, Spain

France had its own Trojan horse.

We have no other option but to keep going northward on foot and to hope Europe is not completely occupied, or to head to the coast and try to get on a boat that will cross us to the British Isles. In whose hands will they be?

Crossing the river Ebro was not as hard as I thought it would be. In the middle of the summer it doesn't carry as much water. We found a crossing which was a pain in the ass but not dangerous. Our new guide was eager. Too proud to fit in his own shirt, he set a pace I couldn't keep up to. I think neither could the others. We were building up fatigue and desperation. All but him, who thought of himself as the commander-in-chief at the battle of the Ebro. Confronted with our silence during the nights of trek, Pedro started a head-splitting hissing chatter. All fucking night hearing his bullshit. Whispering to the collar of his shirt, but sure that I, following right behind, would listen and be a part to his sorry jests. But he didn't strike a good audience with me.

I'm no expert in geography or orientation, but it was obvious that during the first two nights Pedro took us North. I told him that if we kept on heading north we would end up on the beaches of San Sebastian. The lands we were crossing looked rather like Vitoria than Navarre to me. Yet there is nothing like feeling godlike; "Shut the fuck up", "guys from Madrid like you know nothing about anything, you see a patch of green and you think you are in Euskadi", "you're like the Basque nationalists, you don't know better than to make Navarre the fifth province of the Basque Country".

Jose, always to himself, wouldn't step in. "We had to trust Pedro. He came from Navarre, he knew the area better than us". "We couldn't just take away his leadership". Maria was silent but her stares eloquently sentenced our guide to the death penalty. Liked it or not we were going north whether it bothered anyone or not. On the third day, while we were resting I asked Pedro if he truly believed he was taking us to a pass in the Pyrenees of Navarre. In a neutral tone I told him he lacked sense of direction, he was simply following the polar star so he wouldn't get lost and as a result we always headed north. That must have touched some sensible spot. He went nuts. Completely over the top. He started shouting and pushing me around. Jose had to break in. He reminded him we were in occupied ground in the middle of a damn war. We couldn't afford to give off our position. His shouting would've been heard several miles away.

Mutual apologies. Faked calm. Defiant looks exchanged. There wasn't a hint of good vibes left between Pedro and I.

Our trek that third night continued through some woodlands. After marching for about four hours, northbound, naturally, we crossed a road and we saw a road sign; Vitoria-Gasteiz, 15 Km. "Navarre? Is this Navarre? You had no fucking clue of where we were or where we were heading". Pedro made a fast movement. Turned and hit me on the head with the back of his rifle. I lost consciousness. When I woke my head was in pain. Someone had cleaned my wound and improvised a bandage around my head. That motherfucker had busted my head with his rifle. I stood uneasily but as soon as I was on my feet again I went straight for him.

Maria stood between us. Pedro like a fighting cock. Saying he wouldn't tolerate any further insubordination and this just made me want to smash his face in so bad, like I've never wished on anyone before. "Who the fuck did he think he was? He wasn't going to tolerate what?" Jose stepped in again, conciliatory, calm. He said we should talk about what had just happened. The route to follow. Our common objectives.

We spent the whole day talking, arguing. Each making his case. Deconstructing the other's. Trying to make clear there was no leader in our group. Reminding ourselves of who the enemy was. Pedro trying to make absurd arguments coming out of who knows what military handbook he must have read as a teenager. There was no common ground. Things started getting ever tenser. Pedro was well camped in his positions. He was in charge and we should obey. I couldn't believe it. I proposed that we pass a vote on whether Pedro should remain in our group or not. We voted. 3 - 1.

It was me that had a gouged scalp, it was me who had been attacked for no reason, it was me who wanted to prevent that this knucklehead be our guide..., it was me that had lost the vote. They had the Stockholm fucking

syndrome. This psycho with a gun had us hostage and Jose and Maria were helping him lead us a certain death.

Fatigue, stress and what we had gone through during the past month had broken their will and turned their brains into potato mash.

If Pedro didn't leave, I would. I started to round up my stuff. I was walking out on them. I always had been hesitant to be in a flock but there was no way I was to continue in a group led by this son of a bitch, who thinks himself a lieutenant commander and who doesn't know what the fuck he's doing.

I turned to bid Maria and Jose farewell. When I turned back again to be on my way I had Pedro at point blank. He had me right in front of the barrel. That slimeball had armed the gun, removed the safe and was pointing at me. He was threatening me. "No one's leaving". I wasn't scared. I only felt disgust. Disdainful, indifferent and even mockingly I dared him to shoot me. "You ain't got the balls to shoot me", "you shit face, you can't even use that weapon". He began sweating. Trembling. Mumbling. "You looser, I'm sure it's not even loaded". He flinched as if he was seeing visions. His sight blurred. He was no longer pointing at me. The rifle hanging from his hands. The hands of a coward. "You should've died in Madrid, taken someone else's place, surely better than you". He was sobbing. "Get out of my way, I'm leaving". He cried. He pointed his rifle back at me. I looked over his shoulder. Maria held the buck knife. One shot. It was loaded after all. And indeed he was a coward. He couldn't handle the pressure and blew his brains off just before Maria slit his throat.

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

The dogs have smelled us. They kept on barking when they got to the bunker. The new tenants are combing the area. They have been inspecting the area for over four hours. Digging. Cutting shrubs with their machetes. What 's going to happen if they find the bunker?

One day, upon awakening from my slumber, I managed not to panic. Well actually, it was my tiredness that achieved it. I couldn't walk to the door. It was too far away, inaccessible. I sat on the bed. Staring at space. My arms were inert. The children run to my side. Rachel was already walking by herself. Had it been that long? Patrick hugged me. He kissed me all over my face, my cheeks, my nose, my forehead. He kept saying that he had missed me so much, while Rachel raised her arms to me and mumbled "mom, mom". I took her in my arms and sat her on my lap. She still smelled like a baby. She smelled of love, peace, welfare. Patrick asked if I was okay. Mark was watching us from the play area, silent, expectant. I looked at him. He was no longer the same. Me neither. It seemed as if I was looking at a stranger. A stranger that caused me to have antagonistic feelings. Fear? Affection? Contempt? Love? A grudge?

That day I had a hot soup. It wasn't really thirsty. Mark had been supplying me with oral re-hydration since the drugging had started. Still, my mouth was feeling pasty. I could hardly speak. It was hard to organize my thoughts. I felt awkward. Crouching behind a thin layer of self-control, my anxiety was still with me. My distress. The fear of dying in that container, of never seeing the sunlight again or breathing fresh air. I tried to get into the

routine as fast as my stiff brain allowed me. Tai-chi helped. It gave me energy. It opened my meridians. But what helped me the most, were Patrick and Rachel. They became my fortress, my crook. My only refuge in the enclosure, until one day, without any prior notice, a window to freedom opened within the bunker.

Every sound coming from outside was very muffled. Usually we could only listen to the silence. Mark looked out the periscope several times a day, to check that everything was empty, that nothing had changed. Until that day. We heard voices. Far away. Weak. Dim. In my case, I had assumed that I was listening to them in my head. It had happened plenty of times since we had been in confinement. Not to Mark. He was always alert. All his senses on guard, registering the slightest change however small. Listening to any noise that did not belong in our reduced habitat. As soon as he heard it, he hooked to the periscope. He shushed us. Silence.

His left hand ran the periscope. With his right hand he was counting over his leg. One, two, three, four..., two..., four. That must have been eight. Eight, what? I went to the periscope. I put my hand over Mark's hand. It was the first time I was touching him since we entered the bunker. He looked into my eyes. There was love in his look. He grabbed my shoulder and put me in the right position to get the view. There were ten people. Six men, two women and two children. They also had two dogs.

Five men headed the group forming a semicircle. Some carried hatchets in their hands. Others knives. The women and one other man walked behind them, were inside the circle. Each of the females was holding a kid. They moved cautiously. When they were about three hundred yards from the house, the ones inside the circle hid behind some bushes. The other five men spread out. They surrounded the house from a prudent distance. Each was gaining ground from their corresponding direction. They didn't know if it was inhabited, and if it was, it seemed they didn't want to shout their presence to the owners of the property. Two of them entered the house, while three others stood guard outside. Some minutes passed. "There is no-one. It seems abandoned". Those who were hidden in the bushes came out. Those who had entered the house came out too.

There, in the glazed entrance of our Earthship, there were ten complete strangers that began to inspect our property. The women and the children went inside the house. They helped the man who had been by their side to get in. He was liming. He seemed wounded. The rest distributed the pending jobs. Two of them went to the top of the mountain. I imagine they wanted to explore the land and check if there were other farms, if there might be people living up there. The three other combed the area in spirals.

The periscope that Mark had assembled was designed to observe the house and the driveway. As soon as they left that area we lost them. We sat

around our table. We talked in a low voice. In whispers. Rachel was busy with a set of wood pieces. It seemed that those strangers had come to settle down. We had to take extra precautions. The bunker was almost two miles away from the house. Soundproofing protected us, but they had brought dogs. For sure, sooner or later we would have the dogs on top of our heads. It would be the litmus test of the filters that Mark had installed in the ventilation system. Also of the soundproofing, and of the camouflaged energy cables that link the house with the bunker.

Mark was restless. He, the undaunted man, who hadn't lost the nerves since the blackout, was now worried of being discovered. Worried because they could find the bunker. I should have also been worried, but I wasn't. Those people didn't inspire me any fear. They seemed regular people. A group fleeing from wherever they came. Seeking safety for themselves and their children. They weren't looking for a bunker with a buried family. They wanted to rebuild their lives. If it was true that there was a war outside, they were just seeking peace. If the world had succumbed to the chaos, they only wanted to find order and stability.

Before locking ourselves up, we released all the animals. They would certainly find them. Or at least those who still remained alive. In spring, as we did every year, we had planted seeds in the veg garden. Some things would have been marred by lack of collection, but many would still be there, just waiting to be collected. They could continue what we had abandoned. They had everything they needed. Without knowing it, they had found the solution to their problems. A self-sufficient house at full capacity. With its own energy. A well supplying water to the house and an irrigation system over the veg patch and the orchard. Vegetables. Ripe fruit waiting to be collected. Hens and ducks that lay an average of four eggs a day. Goats and a cow that would give them milk and also a workhorse and a mare.

Those strangers had slipped into my life. Not into the false reflection of my prison, but into my real life. My outside life. My life in freedom. They had got infiltrated in my dreams and now they were part of me. They were my link to the free world.

* * *

Wednesday, August 19th

Tokyo, Japan

Gasani instructed his pupils one day: "Those who speak against killing and who desire to spare the lives of all conscious beings are right. It is good to protect even animals and insects. But what about those persons who kill time, what about those who are destroying wealth, and those who destroy political economy? We should not overlook them. Furthermore, what of the one who preaches without enlightenment? He is killing Buddhism".

A coup d'état in the US. I have not yet assimilated it. The last conference with Eric and Chris was puzzling. Short. Fast. Loaded with fear and confusion. Full of contradictory and partial information. Brushstrokes of the world situation's drawing, but not the full picture. It was as if someone had thrown the pieces of a puzzle over the table and it needed to be recomposed with the knowledge, from the beginning, that more than half of the pieces were not there.

The office of New York does not exist any longer. It seems that New York does not exist either. They have been attacked by an Islamic enemy. The Islamic nation they said. I do not know if it is a nation born as a result of the outage, if it is a concept that has been consolidated in the past years or if it is just a name given by Eric and Chris. What seems certain is that the blackout has triggered the start of that holy war that has been hanging over the world for decades. The news we had received about a war in Africa, the Middle East and Europe, was the Islamic nation's jihad. They have won. I assume, taking only into account the percentages of Muslim population in the countries, that the northern half of Africa, all the Middle East, some parts of Asia and,

through the jihad, much of Europe, are part now of this new nation. In just a month they have almost taken over a quarter of the earth's surface. That gives them power. They are organized. They have the largest remaining oil reserves in the world. They are the first organized force emerging from the chaos. I would never have thought that those countries would succeed. They must have some tactical advantage that has allowed them to react so quickly. Although as far as I understand they have still been unable to restore electrical power.

Since our latest conference I have been trying to collect new pieces of the puzzle. Pills of information for my restlessness. Our contacts with the embassies of Sweden, Finland and Russia confirm that the borders of their countries are receiving EU citizens every day. Not many, those who manage to flee the genocide. It seems that the new Islamic nation wants the European territory, but wants it clean. Surely, they have established policies for their people to create new settlements in the conquered land. It would be an optimal way to redistribute the overpopulation of some Islamic countries. An ethnic cleansing, a way to establish their citizens in a rich territory. Land with infrastructure, homes, industry, livestock, and agriculture. Ripe fruit, ready to be picked up.

Could all be an Islamic ploy? If they had created the worldwide blackout virus and knew the date when the grids would fall, they could have coordinated the European invasion. They could have got prepared.

One way or another, the truth is that now they are strong. The world has fallen into anarchy, except in one area. Chaos is feeding the Middle East and chaos is making it grow. With their resources and the newly acquired in Europe, Africa and parts of Asia they have begun to attack the US. Eric was crying while explaining that New York no longer exists. They do not know what kind of weapons they have used. It was the checkmate to the US government. From the refuge in which they were hidden, they did not answer forcefully, at least not with the severity that the Army expected. What remained of the US Army has taken control over the country. They have been erected as the new Government. They have got reorganized. They dominate the country. The first action was a military offensive in the Middle East. Our contacts did not know the scope. Neither did they know whether it has been done with support from the Sixth Fleet. They did not even know if the Sixth Fleet still existed. They believed that the Fifth Fleet had fallen into enemy hands.

In the American territory, the Army has confiscated land, farms, and factories..., everything they needed to be self-sufficient. They have got reorganized and are again the most powerful Army in the world, wanting to prove it to themselves, to the American citizens and to the enemy that has given them the opportunity to seize power, the newly minted Islamic nation. They are back on the game board. A dangerous force. Armed. A force with

which we will have to reach an agreement. I must send a raid team to the port. If the Seventh Fleet is alive, we should contact them. Corporations can continue to dictate the rules of the game, but after this we have to take into account the US Army, we have to have them on our side. It was a mistake to think they were in decay. Too much power to avoid a fight.

It will take a while for the American corporations to get regrouped, but they will be the first to close alliances with their own Army. I must maintain contact with Crynf. They must see us as allies. They have to convey that message to the military command. There are so many messages to convey to the Army. I have to get in touch with the Seventh Fleet. Now that they have been reorganized, they will be a key player in the world order. I have to make them realize that they could not only govern the United States, but the whole world. No more countries. No more borders. We must be one against the common enemy. It's good to have a common enemy. The Islamic nation will be the enemy and while the army focuses on the defence, corporations will be able to draw a new economic map. A new social order. People will no longer be citizens of a country. They will belong to corporations. The corporation will be their family. It will provide them with comfort, protection, security. The provider who caters for all their needs; housing, health, education, entertainment, food, utilities. It does not take more than ten corporations to cover all the human needs. It can be done. The key is for a corporation to get the antivirus. That corporation better be Tyo. The new situation in the US gives us a narrow window of time to get the antivirus before the American corporations. They will lose the coming weeks. At the moment the chaos is taking over them. The key to everything is the antivirus, but if the Islamic nation has actually created the virus, will they also have the antivirus?

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

iForbear, o troubles of the world!

iAnd pardon and ye nill forbear: I went to seek my daily bread

I find that breadless I must fare: For neither handcraft brings me aught

Nor fate allots to me a share:

How many fools plead reach while darknesswhelms the wise and ware.

Stories from the Arabian nights "The Fisherman and the Jinni¹⁰"

We camped on the outskirts of Al-Khartoum for two days. The campsite was already set up when we arrived. There were another five men similar to the one that had bought me. Afro hair, very dark skin, Arab features. There were also two women. They dressed in tunics similar to mine, only a different colour. They took care of all the work, save anything that had to do with the camels. Right next to the campsite they had stuck some pickets on the ground which, coupled with some ropes, formed an improvised fence. Inside I could see at least thirty camels. This time I was not thrown in with the animals. I was allowed to remain at the camp. Albeit tied to a picket. They must have been certain I would try to escape if I was let untied.

The men came and went to the city. They would return with other men. First they took them to see the camels. Then they would enter the largest haima¹¹, the one at the centre of the camp. The women entered and exited the tent with trays. They were negotiating the sale of the camels. On the second

day, one of the groups stayed longer than usual. More trays than in previous days went back and forth. They ate more, drank more tea and ended up smoking shisha¹². When the group left, they took twenty five camels. The camp's men went to the city and the women started to dismantle the tents. While they tidied up everything in bundles, ready to be loaded onto the four remaining camels, the men bought provisions with the money obtained from the sale. They got back just after the camp had been dismantled and cleared. I was not able to see what they had bought. Their purchases were also packaged up and ready to be loaded onto the camels. The men took care of the loading. It seemed as if the women could not deal with the animals. The man who had bought me was the only one who rode them. He is the oldest, but I do not think his age is the reason for the privilege. He is treated with respect. He had authority. He must have been their leader. What was he doing in the town where he bought me? Why would he leave his people here and travel alone to that filthy town? I am sure it was not to buy a slave. Why did he chose me? There were others, younger, prettier, with a healthier look. What am I doing here? What are they going to do to me?

We set off a few hours before sunset. On foot. I had no shoes on. The sand was burning. The sun, even though lower, was still scorching hot. We walked until the sun went down through increasingly desert ground. We stopped in an area with packed sand. The women took me with them behind some dry and spiky bushes. There, they, and I, relieved ourselves. I could feel my pelvic region burning. When I finished, they pulled on my rope to take me to the place where I was left, this time without making use of the picket, before turning to set up the campsite. I was dizzy. Exhausted. My vision was fuzzy. Everything was spinning round. I think I fainted. That first night I was delirious. My body was burning hot. My teeth chattered. Before the day broke, I was awakened with a shake. The camp had already been dismantled. I could not sit up. I do not know whether it was the fever, dear need or providence, but I managed to remember some words in Arabic: "Maa'¹³". "Ana marída¹⁴". They let me drink from a ladle and I fainted once again. When I awoke, I was tied to one of the camels. The ground was bumpy. The camel's hooves where huge. His hair was dirty. It smelled rotten. There were flies all around him, around me. I tried to move but the ropes would not let me. I did, however, attract the attention of one of the women. She saw I was conscious. She came over, gave me more water and stuck some crushed leaves in my mouth. They tasted sour. I would have spat them out, but she gagged me. The sun was high. It was hot as hell. My head was going to explode. I could feel fire between my legs. Fire inside my stomach. It must be an infection. There, in the middle of the desert, without medical assistance, it would not be long before I died. It was for the best. I did not want to keep on living. I did not want to keep on suffering. A deep sleep took over me. My scarce strength gave in. I must have been unconscious or delirious for the next couple of days. I do not remember stopping, or setting up the camp, or

the nights or the days. I do not recall anything else until we arrived to the village. I woke up when we had already stopped. In fact, I woke up when they unloaded the camels and brought me down with the rest of the stuff. The village looked like the camp we set up and dismantled every day, but bigger. They removed my gag. My mouth still tasted bitter from the leaf paste I had been given. I retched and realized it was not only the taste, the leaves were still in my mouth. I vomited. They pulled on the rope that tied my hands. I was taken to a tent. There was a fire burning in the centre. They were burning some kind of plant. It had a penetrating smell. It reminded me of the incense I had smelled as a child in some church. They made me lie down on a carpet and took my clothes off. I had no strength to oppose. Two women cleaned me with wet warm cloths and gave me a cup of tea. It made me sleepy. It distanced me from reality. I could see everything around me, everything that was going on, like an outer body experience. When they finished, an old woman arrived, her face wrinkled, her skin leathery from the sun and the wind. She palpated my whole body, from head to toe. Johari's cuts had healed, but the rapes had left a much deeper print. After carefully examining my whole body, the women that had washed me helped her open my legs. Each one was holding a thigh. It reeked from a distance. I could smell it myself. Putrid. The woman wrinkled her nose. She took a knife out of a leather sleeve. I tried to resist, but both of the women held me tight, what were they going to do? Despite her age, her pulse was firm. She shaved my pubis. With quick and accurate moves she made several cuts. Something oozed. She pressed on them, squeezing more stuff out. I felt like I was being drilled. She kept on cutting. I screamed with pain, what were they doing? I felt cold when she put a poultice over the area. With something that looked like a spatula she put the paste into my vagina. Then, she brought the little bowl with the plants to my crotch. She moved it in circles around my pubis. I could feel the warmth of whatever it was that was burning. She bandaged the area with some clean cloths. I was given something to drink and they covered me with a blanket that looked like it was made of camel or goat skin. Once again, the paste of crushed leaves, the drowsiness... the old woman touched my forehead. She must have been the tribe's midwife, the quack. A nomad tribe in the desert.

- Esmee Bushra.

Her name was Bushra¹⁵. That was the last thing I heard before my eyes closed and I entered the world of dreams.

* * *

Pyrenees, France

Nights are much colder since we crossed the Pyrenees. We should get warmer clothing. We should get new shoes. We need to get food. We need to change our strategy.

There have been times during the last week when I doubted we'd ever reach the Pyrenees and make it across to France. That dick Pedro made us loose many days, and added at least 60 extra miles to our beaten bodies. To make matters worse Jose had not gotten over the fact that he shot his brains off. He made us bury him. He even said a prayer for him. Beyond belief. What for? He was dead. He decided himself. He was only a drag. Why should we worry about him? One less. He had nothing to add. He wanted to force his leadership upon us. He wounded me. He wanted to kill me. Maria reacted really well. I think that's what really bothers Jose, Maria would have done him to save me. She's got guts. If he hadn't pulled the trigger she would have slit his throat like a lamb's. She voted Pedro in, to keep the group united, to avoid a fight by creating a tie but she loathed him as much as I, or more. The subject is off-limits with Jose. He doesn't want us to talk about the 'incident'. That's his problem.

It took us a while to get to Urbasa. Our encounter with the Sorians made us wearier. We sighted some fighters and signs of an encampment in the distance but we modified our route to avoid any contact. Jose's back to leading the way. He doesn't know this area like the highlands of Castile but his hiking experience has made it second nature for him to move around any terrain. We continue to walk during the night and so far we've been lucky.

Most nights are clear of clouds and Jose uses the stars and hiking route signs to find his way. He's bent on teaching us some of his orienteering skills. He's managed to have us tell some groups of stars apart and recognize hiking signs.

My star gazing knowledge is limited to telling the Big Dipper, follow five times the length of its two last stars in line and reach the polar star, which lays North and belongs to the Little Dipper.

Now I also know that the Morning Star lies East at dawn and West at dusk. It's the first star you can see in the night sky and the last to leave the skies in the morning. Then again, it is not really a star, it's actually planet Venus that is visible only during dawn or dusk. Some smart-ass gave it two different names just to mess with the minds of those of us clueless on this subject, just like the hiking world.

I'm an urbanite. I don't like the countryside. I just don't see the fun of it. Why sleep outdoors having luxury hotels where you're greeted with clean sheets and towels, hot water, cable TV, Internet access, room service, and even chocolate on your pillow. I would have never walked the hills for days or made bivouacs¹⁶ under the stars. In my book it makes more sense to practice an organized sport, under the supervision of a good personal fitness trainer, at the hippest gym of the moment where you can see and be seen. But it's been my twisted fate to go down another road, and I am now hiking what I've previously never walked in my entire life. Here I am, screwed into crossing Spain on foot, in the middle of a fucking war and learning there are guys who slap paint onto rocks, boulders, trees, anywhere they can, just to mark footpaths.

Correction: the paint slaps, according to Jose, are actually path signs that follow a pattern. There is always some other colour and white. The other colour tells whether it's a long or short range path, if it's a European path, a path crossing the Pyrenees or a regional route... It turns out you can trek any colour you fancy. On some boulders we've seen so many different colours it's hard to tell how anyone could make any sense of it all.

According to Jose it is the hiking clubs and some local associations that do the work. Some paths have a century long history. They are the ancient pilgrimage or trading routes. There's one, linking Turkey with Saint James of Compostela, another one from Sweden to Rome, another one from Venice to the French front. Each one has a number, just like highways, E-3, E-6... The pilgrimage route to Santiago some people walk from Leon or Soria pales in comparison. How long will people have to walk to get to Santiago from Turkey? The route marks are definitely helpful to an extent, but trying to follow one of them without knowing beforehand what the itinerary is, what signs you need to look for, where it takes you through and other such details is no picnic. If we add the fact that we have to avoid towns and villages,

roads, bridges which may be watched and we take into account that we didn't know where the pass from the Pyrenees to France in the Navarre region was, it all becomes goddamn complicated.

It's taken us eleven days to get to the Pyrenees from Vitoria. Eleven days to find the mountain pass. The ascent was brutal. We didn't find as many farms as in the meadows of the Jarama or Ebro rivers. Nights were getting colder. In exchange for helping Jose bury Pedro I managed to leave him stripped naked and we shared his clothes among the three of us. We were heading to the Pyrenees during the second half of the month of August. Day by day it was starting to get colder. Pedro was dead and he didn't need clothing anymore. Jose tugged but he finally gave in. We took his shoes too, just in case. Soon one of us would pierce a hole through our soles and at least we'd have some reason to bless the soul of the deceased Pedro.

Luck was on our side when crossing the mountain pass. Its altitude must have been one of the lowest through the Pyrenees. We saw its name on a sign: Izpegui. Compared to the surrounding mountains it was relatively mild and not a main pass as it was not watched over. We should have realized that if France had not been occupied, even the most insignificant pass would have been guarded with tanks to avoid invaders from moving north into their country.

When we crossed, Jose and Maria wanted to push ahead until sunrise. We passed close to Baigorri. From the distance the village looked calm, as it should be in the middle of the night. We continued north and reached a crossroad. One of the roads followed a river. We decided to find a spot to stop for the day. We found an elevated area, well protected, from where we could watch the road. It wasn't dawn yet. Jose and Maria were exultant. We had made it to France. Yes! We had to be on guard. After dawn we would approach the nearest village. We would be given refuge. This nightmare would be over. I shared my concerns with them. I found it weird that the border wasn't patrolled by the French army. As we were debating the issue we saw a convoy drive by. At its front and back two military vans with tarped boxes. On the tarp a golden five-point star over a crescent. I remember seeing the same flag in Madrid. They corralled what looked like seven trucks carrying livestock. Just like the prisoner convoys we saw in Madrid.

France was invaded too.

Silence. Tears rolled down Jose's cheeks. Maria was livid. In shock. Not capable of uttering a word. I helped them to sit on the ground. We were left with few options. Sitting it out where we were in the hope that things might get better in France would take us to a certain death. We had to push ahead. The invasion would surely not be global. The logistics of it and the sheer numbers of the Muslim population in the British Isles made it difficult for them, too, to be occupied. The problem was how to get there. All ports would

be guarded. Not a single ship getting in or out. And the Eurotunnel would surely be blocked. The other option was Northern Europe. Less densely populated and with less immigration. It would have made an invasion of the Spanish or French sort much harder. It was a long shot indeed. It would be tough. We could die trying. Just like when we fled Madrid. We dragged on absolute exhaustion, but we also had the experience of having survived extremely harsh conditions for more than one month . We had to keep the faith. If we surrendered, it was better to commit suicide and not wait for tomorrow.

* * *

North Vancouver suburbs, Canada

What could have happened to the owners of this farm? They had everything they might need right here. Why did they leave? If they aren't here, they may have died. We are lucky. We could have ran the same fate but somehow we have been blessed with good fortune. After the last weeks of deaths, hunger, fear, we're here. We'll work the land, we'll take good care of her, we'll pamper her and in return she'll give us food and protection.

Mark had really thought of everything. I don't know whether to admire or fear him. The squatters settled down pretty fast, just as it didn't take long for the dogs to start haunting the bunker area. They barked. We heard the shouts of the owners calling them. But the dogs didn't move, they kept barking over our heads. First came two men. We had called the one with the black hair and beard the Blacksmith. The second one was bald, our nickname for him was Kojak. When they got closer to our area, they also got out of the periscope's field of vision. The dogs didn't shut up. After several minutes, we saw how the men headed to the house and walked the dogs on the leads. They hadn't found anything, but as soon as they released the dogs they came back to our area. They howled. They must have been scratching the surface. We saw how the Blacksmith, Koyak and the Ninja, the eastern guy, approached us again. They were bringing shovels, those that we used to keep in the shed. They were going to start digging. There were around ten feet of earth above the container, but if they persevered, they could find us. What would we do then?

Mark was tense. He said they might find the bait. What bait? He had thought of the possibility that people might come during our enclosure, and that they may bring dogs. At about a couple of feet below the surface, at different spots, above and around the bunker area, he had buried dead animals. The biggest one was the remains of a reindeer hunted some years ago. He had also buried some of our first animals, those who had died; the goats, the hens and a stillborn calf. He thought they weren't good for our consumption and they would give him a perfect alibi, in case there were ever dogs hunting up our position. If the squatters found the buried animal bones, they'd quit their search. The dogs would end up getting used to the smell coming out of the bunker. They'd stop barking and howling. The owners would be satisfied. They shouldn't continue digging deeper. The key was for one of them to find the decoy corpses fast and for that, the dogs that had found us would play an important role. This time, they should be helping us.

I was astonished. Did Mark have any more surprises left? What would his plan be if they found us? I asked him, but got no answer. His silence confirmed that he had thought of something if the case came up. Was it a collective suicide? Blowing everything up? With the possibility looming over us, I decided not probe any further.

We got lucky. Kojak found the bait pretty soon. He called the others. We couldn't see them but they were talking in a really loud voice. The ventilation system allowed us to hear almost the whole conversation. "Fuck! Come here guys! I've found buried bones", "no wonder the dogs were barking!" Sound of more shoving. A heavy blow. They had found something big. Reindeer antlers. "If those who lived here hunted a reindeer, maybe we could be just as lucky and find one for ourselves". "Come on! Let's cover this". "Hope the dogs stop bugging us".

They kept barking but the excavations stopped. After ignoring them for a couple of days, the dogs stopped howling and barking in our area.

Our life in the bunker became extremely quiet. The films were viewed with headphones on, as well as the music. We didn't talk much and when we did, it was in whispers. The silence made me feel the loneliness; my own, the children's and Mark's. Rachel was suffering it more than the rest. She couldn't understand our silence. She was always by my side. I had her in my arms for hours. I cradled her. I sang songs and told her stories, quietly so that only she could hear them, but the boys would also listen. Most of the time, Patrick came and curled up next to me. Even Mark gathered around the heat of the stories, perfect worlds with happy endings. The physical contact, the warmth, the hugs, the sweet words whispered in the ear, gave us back part of our humanity. We restored the ties that were broken during the first month of confinement. It gave us back hope. The bunker would be open in four months. Until then, we should try to keep the family together, seamlessly. Re-surfacing would not be an easy task. We had to hibernate for

the next few months. Bringing our lives to a minimum. Not wasting our vital energy. We ought to be prepared.

* * *

Wednesday, 1st September

Tokyo, Japan

Suiwo, the disciple of Hakuin, was a good teacher. During one summer seclusion period, a pupil came to him from a southern island of Japan. Suiwo gave him a problem to work on:

"Hear the sound of one hand".

The pupil stayed for three years but could not pass this test. One night he came in tears to Suiwo.

"I must return south in shame and embarrassment," he said, "for I cannot solve my problem".

"Wait one week more and meditate constantly," advised Suiwo.

Still no enlightenment came to the pupil.

"Try for another week," said Suiwo. The pupil obeyed, but in vain.

"Still another week". Yet this was of no avail. In despair the student begged to be released, but Suiwo requested another meditation of five days. They were without result. Then he said:

"Meditate for three days longer, and then if you fail to attain enlightenment, you had better kill yourself".

On the second day the pupil was enlightened.

I feel my time is coming to an end, I am late. If I do not get Tyo to have a say in the new world order during the next few weeks, we will die. We will be swept. I need a cover letter to be received by the Seventh fleet. And the letter should be so amazing that in addition to getting them to hear me, it should also give me the credibility to place on the table action plans that need to be

seriously considered and accepted. I will only be able to do this if I offer something in exchange, and I cannot think of a better token than the antivirus. If they could make enough progress to believe that once they get it out into the open grid it would work... I would be able to arrange my meeting with the commander of the Seventh Fleet. He would come here, to our offices. We could reach an agreement. Our attempts in recent days to hold a talk with them have been in vain.

I have made changes to the restoration team. A month without results is too long. Just trying is not enough to. They must achieve the goal. If the first could not make it, those who arrive with more drive to an already fertilized ground will do it. The dismissed have been sent to the raid teams. Life on the ground floor, outside. Weakness is not an option. Failure does not deserve a reward, only success does. We are losing more and more people in the raids. The shortage of food at this point is compelling. Diseases have decimated the population. The raid teams have reported multiple pests over the city. Many have left Tokyo and the remaining had got organized in urban gangs, for which life is worth less than a loaf of bread or some fresh water. They will remember the lab hours as the best of their lives. They could have been heroes, but their inability has converted them into martyrs.

The new restitution team knows it. In twenty days they must have achieved results. If not, their survival and the corporation's will be seriously endangered. We either get a sponsor that caters for our provisions and ensures our safety, or the building and all of us inside of it will fall. But the sponsor must need us so much that, in addition to helping us in our current position of weakness, he must also give us credit and even obey us.

The news that arrived yesterday may be useful. A new alliance in the making. I hope it is more productive than the ones with Uthy and Coperx. So far it is easy to quantify their help, close to zero. Their only contribution has been the volunteers to the raid teams. Then again, our volunteers were not going to get them any food anyway, so I do not really know if they are a help or an element of competition seeking for provisions. If they were not there, the work of our teams would be simpler. They also contributed with some engineers for the restitution team. Engineers that like the others have ended up in the raid teams where they should probably have been from the beginning. I think the new team also has some of their engineers. Let's see if they can excel. We may have a weak situation, but theirs is critical. I imagine they are aware of this and will try to strive for results.

I must focus on the new alliance. Bronte has managed to resist. Much of Bronte City is still up and running. The city had developed a good contingency plan in addition to implementing its own program for transition cities. They were not one hundred percent self-sufficient in energy, or food, but what they had has allowed its citizens not to starve, and has prevented complete chaos. They have closed the city with electric fences so that nobody

can enter or exit without control of the local authorities. One of our exploration teams arrived there about ten days after leaving Tokyo. Of the five hundred that left, only half got there alive. It was a large group. They would have never been admitted to Bronte town, but they had a good escort. They did not take with them just any member of the Board, they had our president. Miraculously, taking into account his age, he had not died on the road. His name opened the doors. They were welcomed and our president stayed in the house of his counterpart in Bronte.

They got rest. They settled down. Each of the survivors of the exploration team was assigned a job, in the exploitation of the forest, urban gardens, maintenance panels or generators, health care, education of the youngest... And so, two hundred of Tyo's employees made it in the daily ration list of Bronte town. In a few days they were part of their place. They were bearers of crucial information on the situation in Tokyo, on the southern coast that they had walked across to get to Bronte town, on the plan I had designed for the survival of Tyo ... That in particular had caught the attention of Yuito Bronda-sama, their president. It's a good plan and he is a good strategist. Despite not having all the details, protected by his people, offering the hospitality of his home, he had managed to sign an alliance with our president. An alliance to join forces in these times of adversity. To share knowledge, resources and power to have more weight in any negotiation or agreement that we might try to close with third parties.

Bronte would benefit from it. The emissaries they have sent, two from Bronte and two from Tyo, confirmed that Bronte is isolated. Bronte City has its own crops and energy, but has failed to establish any kind of communication with the outside. They need information, to contact representatives of other countries, other corporations. They have not been able by themselves. They could do it through us. They lacked a voice in the events that were defining the future of Japan. The future of the world. They had also formed a restitution team and seemed to be making some progress. It would be good for both teams to share their work. They had a small communications station which so far had failed to establish contact with the outside. They had set a HF channel to hold a conference call with me. It would be tomorrow at 9:00 am.

I can back up the alliance signed by our president or I can withdraw my support. What does Bronte bring to the table? It would be difficult for us to bring back provisions from their city to Tokyo. They would be intercepted en route. Of the thousand people that stayed here at the headquarters, three hundred have died. Most of them were in the raid teams. Murdered by the mafia, the urban gangs, or killed by various diseases that plague the city. Some of those who were not on the ground floor, among those who lived on the upper floors of the building, have also died. Several children. Without direct sunlight, without access to fresh air. We are not well fed. The fresh

water we get is not always in the best conditions. If we fail to come up with a better supply, during the next month we will have more casualties. We could move to Bronte city, but it would also result in casualties. Bronte, like other automotive companies, has been investigating the field of robotics for years. If I extrapolate the deaths in the population that depends on me to the rest of the country, robotics will play a key role in the restoration of a new welfare state. Robotics and the genetic improvement project in which Tyo had made his biggest research wager. My project.

Bronte's knowledge is complementary to ours. It is also one of the top five companies worldwide. They have international influence. They could be a good ally.

The loose end in this whole affair could be the power our old president would regain signing this alliance and that is where Yuito Bronda-sama once again shows that he is a good strategist. Along with the sealed document, signed by the two presidents, one of the Bronte's emissaries also handed me the resignation letter from our old president, who delegated his office and his functions onto me.

Now, the only factor to uncover is how much power share Yuito Bronde is expecting to get in this binomial.

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

The King sat down at one of the lattice windows that overlooked the pleasure grounds. A postern of the palace, which was carefully kept private, swung open, and out of it came twenty slave girls surrounding his brother's wife, who was wondrous fair, a model of beauty and comeliness and symmetry and perfect loveliness. They walked under the very lattice and advanced a little way into the garden till they came to a jetting fountain a-middlemost a great basin of water. Then they stripped off their clothes and all paired off.

Suddenly, the King's wife cried out in a loud voice: "iOh, Massaud!" And then sprang a big slobbering blackamoor, who walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him as warmly. Then he laid on his back and enjoyed her.

On likewise did the other slaves with the girls till all had satisfied their passions and they ceased not from kissing and clipping, coupling and carousing, till day began to wane. When Shah Zaman saw this conduct of his sister-in-law, he said to himself: "By Allah, my calamity is lighter than this!

Immediately, letting his grief fade, he said to himself: "This really is larger than anything that I have been through!" And from that moment on he resumed eating and drinking as much as he could".

Stories from the Arabian nights, "King Schahryar and his brother king Schahzaman"

Once again, I lost track of time. I do not know how many days I was in that tent for. Sometimes, when I regained consciousness, Bushra was there with me. Cleaning my wounds, changing my bandages. Crushing herbs to

make the catapasm she spread over me. Other times, the side of the tent in which she used to lay down was empty. Day after day I began to feel better. I started taking a little warm broth, spicy. Broths that Bushra brought me to the tent. Why had I not died? I had certainly had enough chances: in Zanzibar, in the trucks, in the boat, in the desert, even here, in this haima. It would have been the most logical outcome. My being alive was against all odds. It did not make sense that I was still alive. My body had formed an alliance with those women. It had fought by their side to make me survive. They could not be held responsible for my situation. I do not know if they were aware of why I was there or what I had gone through before I got to their village. Probably not. They had taken care of me. They wanted me alive. What good would a dead slave be?

As the days went by, Bushra managed to get me to stand up. The first day I went outdoors, I leaned on her with my right arm. Another woman held me from my left side. They took me out when the sun was on its way down. Even so, the exterior light hurt my eyes. When I focused my sight and my eyes became adapted to the stream of light on the outside, I looked around me. Around us, all I could see was a desert of pressed sand, with some scattered bushes. Plenty of stones and rocks. The scenery was devastating. How could they live there? I could see no trees in the vicinity, and no sign of water.

The camp was made up of more than twenty tents. They were round in shape, covered with mats made of palm leaves. The top of the tents took on different colours. It gave the impression they were covered with fabric. The sides and entrances to the haimas had blankets made of animal skin, I assumed from a camel.

It was bizarre. I could not see a single animal in the campsite. They probably kept them in some other not too distant area, somewhere with resources with which they could feed them. Around us all I could see was dust, stones and dry branches, not even the hungriest goat would be able to eat any of it.

There were no men to be seen either. I could see women, old people, children, but no young men. During the time we spent in Al-khurtum, the men were the ones that had cared for the animals. It was expectable that if the animals were not around, neither would the men.

There was movement in the camp, but it was not buzzing. Everything was calmly executed. The old folks talked in groups. Men on one side. Women on the other. There must have been a maximum of thirty children of different ages playing in groups. They were not excessively noisy. The women were scattered in different parts of the campsite. Some were grinding grains in a mortar of a size I was not used to seeing. The base was made of stone, approximately thirty inches high. Of about a span in diameter. The mortar used to grind the grain, was a long and thick stick, of a dark and polished

wood, or maybe it was made of some dark stone. Other women were tidying up the haimas, smoothing out the carpets, fabrics or blankets. Some of them, the youngest, played with the younger kids. Others braded each other's hair, after applying some kind of thick fat onto it.

They sat me down next to the women that were grinding the grain. It was a dark-coloured grain. In front of them, there was a small fire where they were boiling water in a large pan. They poured the ground grain into the water and after letting it boil for a couple of minutes they added milk from a wineskin. Before the milk reached boiling point, they drew the pan away from the fire. They called the children. In less than a minute they were all there, around the fire. One of the women that had been grinding the grain produced some wooden bowls from a bag. She passed them one by one to another 'miller' who was serving the porridge. They then prepared the bowls that several women took over to the circle of old people. The older women approached the fire to have their dinner with us. When they gave me my bowl, they repeated the name o'tam several times. It was easy to remember, porridge similar to the oatmeal eaten in the United States.

I was not tied up. I had not been sent to a different area than the women in the tribe. My bowl was similar to all the others. I had not been served less food, and they had treated me no different to any other one of them, at least that I could tell. They had bought me as a slave, but here the women were not treating me as one. I was another one of them. Sitting among them, listening to their voices, their endless laughs, I had a distant feeling of what I remembered as normal.

When they all finished, the bowls were washed. I was surprised to see how, in the middle of nowhere, with no rivers, lakes, ponds or any other source of drinkable water, they did the dishes with water. They did to waste much, but they rinsed all the bowls in a bucket of fresh water.

Night began to fall. The women flared up the fire with some type of coal or cinders. Slowly, they all gathered around the fire. They were boiling water in some ceramic pots. When it actually boiled, they poured it out of the jugs through a spout with a filter. They let it cool to pour it once again into the jug, where it was brought to the boil again. This process brewed a thick coffee, with an intense aroma. It was jebena. I am not sure whether that was what they called the coffee, the whole process or the name of the jugs. What I did know is that the coffee beans they used were part of the things they had bought in Al-khurtum. All the adults drank one cup. Again I was offered some, just like any other. Tasting the coffee, under the stars, some of the women began to sing. A boy brought a string instrument to one of the elders. Sitting, with crossed legs, bare-footer, he leaned the box on his tunic, between his legs. With a rustic arch, made with a stick of something similar to bamboo which drew a rope, he started to play. Some of the elders joined the women in the singing. It was ethnic music. It sounded Arab like, like the

type of music one could hear in Egypt or Morocco. Bushra was sitting next to me. I gestured playing an imaginary arch and I shrugged my shoulders in an enquiring attempt. She understood. The instrument was called a rababah. It was similar to a violin. If I could get my hands on one, I don't think it would take me very long to learn how to play it.

They sang for hours, or at least it seemed like hours to me. The music penetrated my soul. I could feel it start a healing process, for a soul that had been broken for weeks. I could feel the warmth of life coming back to me. The sky was clear, and the stars shined brightly. I looked for the north star. A lighthouse in the darkness of the whole Northern hemisphere. A guide for travellers, for nomads, for those of us who were lost. Unmistakable.

I was in the middle of some desert, probable the Nubia desert. My night guide whispered that our camp was oriented towards the west, towards the sunset, the promise of a new day.

"If the day could talk, it would advertise the night...night dreams are the threads with which we weave the day's suits".

My memories of Julién and Salma flooded back. Under the blanket of stars that covered the dry desert, I cried. I cried for the loss of my children, of my prior life. I let out the anger and rage I had built up inside for everything I had had to go through in the last few weeks.

Destiny is inscrutable. It had not been my choice, but it looked like this was going to be my new home for years to come, maybe even for the rest of my life. My best option at this point was to learn as much as I could as fast as possible about their traditions, language, laws, anything that would allow me to be one of them, not a slave, just another member of the tribe.

* * *

Gascoigne, France

The next full moon will light the path to freedom. One last push and we'll be out of this shit. We've earned it. No guts, no glory and we've busted our balls for this.

The break in the Woods of Gascoigne has given us new endurance and restored hope in ourselves. Getting this far wasn't easy. Jose and Maria haven't quite gotten over the fact that France was invaded. As for me, ever since we left Madrid I feel as if everything we are going through is unreal. It's like I'm living someone else's reality. That of a flick hero. I see this ordeal from the outside, or from the inside, depending on how you look at it. I live life with borrowed strength, borrowed temporarily from a gung-ho superhero into whom I've turned, until this film is over. I make an effort, I give it all I've got, but only on the screen, it's not real. A screen which I'm sure millions are watching, holding their breaths with every twist of the plot, just like me. During the day, while it's my turn to keep watch I keep telling myself this cannot be real. A darn good adventure yet not a real one. That allows me to keep a distance, get an adrenaline rush and not panic, and yet I can still feel the energy draining out of me.

After agreeing that the only direction to follow was North, we decided to hug close to the coast. When we camped on high ground we could see the coast at a distance. I wish we could be on a vessel sailing away from this fucking invasion.

Three days later we entered the Landes region. We were entering pine tree forests. We saw many trekking signs, it seemed that we were still in a pilgrimage route but what really guided us, again, was the pole star. We had to keep going North. The starry nights of summer were still a big help. Jose began to notice human traces in the forest. Sometimes there were footsteps, sometimes broken branches, cut trees, some remains of fire, less food than would be usual in a forest that was not being exploited. We were alert. I was in favour of trying to find other groups of Europeans. France had always been well known for creating resistance movements. Surely there would be people trying to fight the invasion. They could help us, provide us with some food, clothing, shelter, information. Perhaps the electricity was back, or the NATO was fighting back the invaders, or perhaps they knew how far the invasion had gone. Jose and Maria were reluctant to establish any contact. Nonetheless contact was made for us. It was during the last watch. That day was Jose's shift. Out of nowhere, in the middle of the woods, a child appeared. He wasn't more than five or six years old. He spoke in French. Jose didn't understand a bloody word. He woke us up. Maria spoke French, so it was her who started talking with the child. He was hungry and thirsty. He asked for food and something to drink. Maria was touched. The mother that all women hide inside, came out and without asking our opinion, she sat the child on her lap and began to share her supplies with him. It was crazy, we didn't have enough to share. She said it was her decision, she was sharing her provisions. I tried not to be a gas bag and I kept my mouth shut. Jose couldn't. It was great. For once he was the asshole and not me. He told Maria not to come asking for our food or water when she'd run out of provisions after having shared them with the child. She looked at me with those big grey eyes and asked me if I was such a dickhead as Jose and wouldn't share what we had with a hungry child. My head wanted to tell the truth, "of course not, fuck the damn boy, we don't know him at all", but looking at Maria, instead, while I got a hard-on for the first time in I don't know how long, I listened to myself saying "he should come with us, we can't leave him here with only four carrots and a little water". She liked that. It was much more than she could have expected. She got up, came towards me and kissed me on the cheek as she whispered "thanks" in my ear, something my brain automatically translated as "why don't we just fuck here and now".

Against Jose's and my own wishes, we were four again. The difference is that Jose could complain and I couldn't. It had been my fault that the kid was dumped on us. It was worse than a burden. Maria had asked him if he was alone. He didn't answer, so we assumed that he was indeed alone, that he needed our help that he wanted to come with us. That night, when we started the hike, the boy began complaining. After three hours, I ended up carrying him. I was physically unable. He wasn't that heavy but I didn't have any spare strength. Soon we had to stop. Jose kept saying it was a folly that the boy would not be able to travel far enough to leave the damn conquered area.

Maria and I didn't say anything. The boy moaned. With our attention focused on what the hell were we going to do with the kid, we didn't realize that we had been surrounded. It was a relatively large group. Men and women. Armed with multifarious utensils. They reminded of the group we met in Soria. When the kid saw them, he ran their way. He hugged a woman. The bastard was not alone. He hadn't really told us otherwise. It was us who had assumed he was, and decided to play holly nuns.

On this occasion it was Maria's turn to talk. She was the only one who could understand them. She translated the important things; we had found the resistance. I was glad. When the invasion began, many French people in the area took refuge in the woods. Maria told them that we were caught in Madrid. That, in just a few days, Madrid had fallen to the Islamic troops. Of how we fled, walking across Spain, crossing the Pyrenees. Our disappointment when we found out that France, too, had been occupied.

With some misgivings, we were invited to go with them to their camp. There were two men with knives escorting us, despite them telling us that we were their guests. They explained that the boy had been used as the bait. Since his arrival, they had been around, watching us. Many people came to the woods looking for shelter but many were lone wolves. They didn't want contact with anyone. They didn't want to help anyone, not even a child. They didn't deserve the forest shelter and so they were expelled. We were the second group who had shared the food with an unknown child. The rest had ignored him. A few had tried to harm him. The latter had been executed on the spot. I looked at Jose. His face did not dare to express any emotion.

Their camp reminded me of Robin Hood's Sherwood Forest as depicted in films, mixed with a tree adventure park. There were zip lines, vines, walkways, bridges ... Their shelters were aerial. Built among the branches of trees. The height of the pines in the area frightened the life out of me. The three of us were freaked out with what they had been able to set up in such a short time.

It was still dark when we reached their camp. We sat around one of the bonfires. We were offered a hot broth, greatly appreciated. Maria asked if they weren't afraid of being located by the smoke. We were told that Muslims knew there were Europeans in the forest but, for now, they had not come to make any fray. That had allowed them to set traps and warning systems in case a stranger entered the area they had delimited inside the forest.

Jose had a strange nostalgic look, he was racking his brains. I felt, more than ever, like I was in a movie that had nothing to do with me. I didn't understand a word of what they were saying. From time to time Maria translated something. France had been completely occupied. Also Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and some areas of Germany. Further east they didn't know. The information they had was from other resistance groups that were

to the north. There were still some geeks around the world, and on these kind of situations, they were very helpful. It seems that there were people who still had and trained homing pigeons in the world. They had been able to establish contact with parts of northern Europe and they, in turn, with the United Kingdom. The British Isles hadn't been invaded. Neither had the Scandinavian countries. Two unknowns least in my list of questions. When Maria translated that part, I told her to ask them if there was any way to cross the English Channel. They nodded. We told Jose, but his mind was wandering. He didn't show the slightest interest. He got up, and left crestfallen for an aimless walk through the camp. I was interested. Where did the ships depart from? Did they charge for the trip? How often did they disembark on the French coast?

It seems that each time the boats arrived at different spots of the coast. They took advantage of the new moon to navigate without being seen from the watch towers. They anchored in sheltered bays during high tide and of course they charged a fare. There was no longer a legal currency but it could be paid with jewellery, food, fuel, tools. The most valuable asset was petrol but it was difficult to get. The second most appreciated things were electronics powered by solar energy, which weren't dependent on the electricity that no longer existed.

During the invasion, the Islamic forces had seized stations, cars, refineries..., in addition to buildings, homes, shops..., everything belonged now, as they themselves called it, to the Islamic nation. Since less than a couple of weeks, their birds were bringing news from the border with Spain. They were starting to bring in trucks through the Pyrenees, loaded with Islamic population that was settling down on the seized properties. They didn't know the criteria followed to assign one or another type of housing for the families that were being brought, but they were repopulating Europe with their own population, with Africans.

So long trying to stem the tide, controlling immigration, denying their entry to our precious countries, forbidding access to our welfare society, leaving the marginal jobs for them, those who nobody wanted in our advanced and cultivated population. So much time stealing their natural resources, plundering their countries to resell to them what was theirs from the beginning. So long, that it has come to the only logical end it could. They have said enough. If we don't want to share, neither do they. Why should they beg when they could get it all. Their goal, necessarily, has to be the extermination of the population in the European area occupied. And our goal, one fucking way or the other, must be getting out of here.

We'll get petrol, gold, food or whatever it takes. In the next new moon we will be on board a pirate ship headed to England and Europe can rot in hell. We must get to the Emerald Coast before the new moon.

The Robin Hoods told us that near Saint-Malo we could get information on where the ships crossing the channel on this upcoming moon would make their landfall. They would give us a shibboleth. They would let their contacts know that we would be arriving a few days before the moonless night. The password would be our safe-conduct into the ranks of the resistance. We could rest a few days with them in their forest. A forest that now smelled like freedom. We were close. I could almost touch it with the tip of my fingers. England was free. There, we would also be free.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

I wonder how it is that people's philosophies have come to spin faster than the changing seasons. The path I have followed, this natural way of farming, which strikes most people as strange, was first interpreted as a reaction against the advance and reckless development of science. But all I have been doing, while I farmed the land out here in the country, is trying to show that humanity knows nothing. Because the world is moving with such furious energy in the opposite direction, it may seem like I have fallen behind the times, but I firmly believe that the path I have been following is the most sensible one.

"The one-straw revolution", Masanobu Fukuoka

I still can't believe that within forty miles of the hell that Vancouver had become, we have found this. It could be our place in the world. After so much suffering... Thanks to Megan, the kids are beginning to overcome it. They still don't talk but at least they have begun to eat. They are doing well enough considering what they've been through. They murdered them. In front of their own children, in cold blood. My poor sister. She had food. The attackers didn't. Her husband reached her right after she got stabbed. He wanted to help. To turn back time, prevent it from happening. He also died. It was only a couple of days after we had entrenched ourselves in Ciarán's house. When I arrived, after my daily foray in search of food, I found the children locked up in a closet. Crying. Terrified. After finding their parent's bodies in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor, I was convinced that I would also find them dead.

When the rest of the group arrived, we held a meeting. We all agreed. We had to leave Vancouver. Day after day, there were fewer patrols on the streets. The looting had degenerated into a war of urban tribes, born under the blackout. It was the only way to survive in the city. Before the end of the first 'black' week, the army lost control. It was virtually impossible to maintain order in the streets. The Government extended the curfew hours until turning it into full day confinement at home.

The first days there was so much uncertainty... We all thought we had been attacked. The Authorities banned the consumption of tap water convinced that it had been poisoned. Albeit there weren't many places that had running water, only those where the slopes of the locations helped with their natural pressure. The canards on bacteriological and nuclear war didn't stop. The air smelled of fear. But fear is forgotten when thirst and hunger strike strong. Our ruled and regulated world exploded. Civil disobedience was not planned, nor organized. We took over the streets. At first afraid of the army and police reprisals for violating the general laws and the particular state of siege and curfew laws. As the days went on and electricity didn't return, the system collapsed. Up to that moment, the over two million population of the city had been governed by an iron regulation, designed and enforced throughout the last century. After the first weeks it became untenable. The law of the jungle won, the survival of the fittest.

The city sunk into a deep shortage, I guess like the rest of the world. Trucks didn't arrive with food, water or petrol. We had to live with what the city had stored in the houses, in the shopping malls, in the supermarkets... During the first skirmishes against the army and the police, the bigger gangs managed to get weapons. I have no idea of how many died in those clashes. We became strong at Ciarán's. His house was the furthest out from the city. He didn't have any close shopping areas, so we thought we would be safe there. Deciding who would be summoned was tough, who would be our pride, our tribe. It could neither be too small, nor too large, because for one reason or another we wouldn't be able to get enough supplies. The core group was clear. My sister, her husband, their two children, Katsumi, myself and Ciarán. The day of the blackout, my sister and her husband were celebrating their wedding anniversary. They had prepared a barbecue at their house to which, of course, Ciarán had been invited. He was their best friend. He introduced them. He was part of the family. The children called him uncle Ciarán. Katsumi and I were spending some time with them. We had returned from Japan, from the Fukoaka school, not too long ago. We meet in the school, the place from which I've uprooted him. I don't know whether Katsumi will ever be able to return to Japan, his home, but what I'm sure about, it's that I'm thankful for having him with me. I know I'm selfish but his knowledge of permaculture and self-sufficiency will be very useful in this

farm. And I need him. I would have never found the courage to overcome what we're going through alone, by myself.

The rest of the group was formed more or less in a spontaneous way. The clashes with the army escalated. The city became a battlefield. The desertions added to the casualties in the army and the police. Dylan was one of those who defected. He turned up one day at my sister's house, just when we were starting to plan out the trip from downtown to what we expected would be Ciarán's shelter. When he arrived he was exhausted, physically and psychically. He said he couldn't keep killing more people. The Army was killing civilians. They were innocent. Just looking for food and water. It's true that to get it, they raided businesses and houses, but who wouldn't, to eat, to survive? When he defected, he took his weapons. A rifle, a pistol, plenty of ammunition and a pair of grenades. He said he didn't want to rejoin the Army. He didn't want to kill more civilians. He hadn't enlisted in the Army for that. They weren't fighting against foreigners, against a foreign attack. The Army was killing the people they were supposed to defend. In the name of peace and order, they were slaughtering the population. He couldn't keep going. He wouldn't participate.

He was a good man. His military knowledge, along with the weapons he had brought, would be of great value to the group that we were organizing.

The day after Dylan arrived, Megan came home with her boyfriend. Megan was my sister's best friend since kindergarten. I would even say that during our childhood, she spent more time with Megan than with me. She didn't live that far. When she arrived, she was with Anselme. Someone else who had been uprooted, left his home and his family due to the blackout. He was Québécois. Megan had met him in one of those flirting Internet networks. Some months ago, in a photo shoot session in Montreal, they met in the real world. They had a burst of hormones and began dating. The blonde model and the intellectual journalist. They didn't match at all. Their relationship would never have survived more than the month that Anselme was going to spend in Vancouver, but fate had tied this relationship with unfathomable bonds. I didn't think either of them would be useful in our group, but the friendship between my sister and Megan left us without any option. We couldn't ask them to leave.

We left Vancouver at night. It took us a couple of days to get bikes for everyone. It wasn't that hard. Many people had left the city and many others had died. The useful properties that became orphan found new owners pretty soon. The things that still had owners also found new ones that claimed them, and in the process they often became orphan too. Vancouver's streets oozed a black and sickly sweet smoke. The tribes burned anything to create roadblocks and bound their areas. The Army, overtaken by the events, had begun to burn the dead bodies that littered the streets of the city, as a health

and hygiene measure. At night, the bonfires provided the only light that lit the streets.

Ciarán and my brother pulled the bike-prams with the children. They went first. They carried the heaviest load, so they were the ones to set the pace. The rest made a circle to close and protect the prams. They transported our most precious assets; the children, the food that we still had at home, the food that we had found in neighbouring shops, blankets and warm clothing. In addition each wore a backpack with carefully chosen tools for the journey; knife, hunting knives, water bottles, detailed maps of Vancouver and its surroundings, a GPS with a solar battery charger, a mini first aid kit with essentials, candles, matches, walkie-talkies, a rechargeable hand-cranked battery charger, flares and stuff like that which we found in my sister's place and on the incursions into the neighbouring houses, those where the owners were no longer there.

The journey to Ciarán's house was quiet. It took us less than an hour. We kept away from bonfires and luckily we didn't come across any gang. That would have meant the death of the entire group.

Ciarán's house was quite hidden. On top of that, he was obsessed with security, which meant that all the accesses to the house, doors, shutters, windows, were reinforced or bulletproof. As a result of all this, the gangs had not tried to break-in. There were many other houses that were much easier to break into than this sort of battleship in the middle of nowhere.

Ciarán had a basement that looked ready to survive a nuclear cataclysm. That's where we settled down. He had supplies for two people to survive three months. We were eight adults and two children, which meant we would have provisions for no more than two weeks. It would give us a break but we had to re-establish a raid's plan, similar to the one we had established at my sister's. We had to get more food and, at the same time, see if we could find something that could be useful in the survivalist lifestyle we were immersed in.

The raids were made in groups of two. Katsumi and me, Megan and Anselme, Ciarán and Dylan and my sister and her husband. One of the couples was always with the children, who almost never left the basement. Usually we preferred that Anselme and Megan stayed home. They were more useful there. Their raids were often useless.

They should have died instead of my sister, but that day they were so keen on doing the search, that my sister agreed. That would leave them more time to spend with their kids. They were very young and very puzzled by everything that was going on.

In one of these raids, Ciarán and Dylan run into Paul and David. Paul was Ciarán's neighbour. He had seen them from his home window. He called

them. He needed help. His boyfriend Dylan was injured. The day before they had found a gang. They had managed to escape, climbing a wall but in the fall, David had broken his leg. It was splintered. Before plastering it, he had to put the bone in place. He should have done it the day before, but he couldn't do it all by himself. He needed someone to hold on to David. Paul was a doctor. It would be a good signing for our group. With that thought in mind Ciarán and Dylan entered his home. They helped him. David passed out in the process. While recovering, Ciarán told Paul that we had formed a group. Unity meant strength. Nowadays lone wolves had lower odds to survive. If they wanted to last, they would have more opportunities inside the group than alone. He didn't have to insist. Paul put everything that might be useful in a suitcase, especially his medical equipment. His two dogs joined the procession, with a makeshift stretcher, which they used to move David to Ciarán's basement.

My sister died a few days after they arrived. It had been almost four weeks since the power had gone out. The situation worsened every day in the city. The Government couldn't maintain order in any way, not even with the force of the army and the police that were decimating their ranks steadily. The gangs had taken control. The violence grew. The assaults were more frequent, like the murders. My sister was a victim of the escalating violence. Ciarán's house, just like my sister's in the centre of the city, turned out to be unsafe. Vancouver was no longer safe. We didn't know if there was a safe place, but if it existed, it would be far from the urban centres.

The maps helped us choose the route. We decided to go up to the North. There was a large expanse of mountain and forest between Capilano and Symour Lake. There we would be able to find food. We could survive until they'd restored order. We couldn't have chosen better, or maybe we could have. That is something that we would never know for sure. For me it's perfect, a better mirror of paradise. The raids, here in the farm, have enabled us to find the animals of the land-owners. We have managed to retrieve a rooster, three hens, a goat that seems to be pregnant, a couple of horses, and on top of that we have seen many wild ducks and rabbits in the area.

The farm follows the classical structure. They have a veg garden area near the house. The fruit orchard a little further and a small barn that makes us think they used to have more goats, or even a cow. There's a fenced lawn area for horses and a tiled room, next to the barn, with cups and cold-storage chambers used as a dairy, where for sure they would have made their own cheese.

I have always dreamed of leaving the city life, building a sustainable house, living a sustainable life. A bio-house in harmony with its own environment. An Earthship just as the one we have found. Built with recycled materials. Powered by renewable energy. I always dreamed of being able to live under ethical and spiritual principles of cooperation and not

competition, neither with other humans nor with nature. Katsumi had the same dream. How many times we had talked about it at Fukoaka school! Taking the first step was complicated. Where do I start?, when?, how?, where?, what would I have to give up?, what if it goes wrong? The chaos had answered all our questions.

Once you lose everything, except your life, it's easy to find the courage to reinvent yourself and start from scratch again, without the fear of not being able to recover what you no longer have.

* * *

Friday, September 17th

Tokyo, Japan

Once a division of the Japanese army was engaged in a sham battle, and some of the officers found it necessary to make their headquarters in Gasan's temple. Gasan told his cook: "Let the officers have only the same simple fare we eat". This made the army men angry, as they were used to very deferential treatment. One came to Gasan and said: "Who do you think we are? We are soldiers, sacrificing our lives for our country. Why don't you treat us accordingly?" Gasan answered sternly: "Who do you think we are? We are soldiers of humanity, aiming to save all sentient beings".

There is nothing better than a little pressure at the right time. We got it. It opened us the door to the commander of the Seventh Fleet. The meeting could not have gone better. They arrived full of scepticism and left ecstatic. Ten people. Two armoured military vehicles. Armed to their teeth.

The alliance with Bronte was decisive. Yuito Bronte is a reasonable man. He is willing to have a two-headed leadership, but recognizes my accomplishments. He values the strategy I have defined and supports my vision of a world controlled by the corps and defended by a powerful Army. He hands over the presidency of the merged corporation. That will guarantee my membership in the future World Management Board.

The approach their restitution team had given to the problem was entirely different from ours. They did not attempt to override the virus, they had worked to modify its operation, so that instead of inhibiting the flow through the grid, it would empower the flow. The search of the yang within

the yin. Our team had managed to decipher some of the code of the virus while trying to develop an antivirus that would counteract it. The union of these two ideas was the solution. Our team modified the deciphered code to enhance the transmission of energy while the virus was working on the grid, rather than trying to cancel its action. They had managed to return the circulation of energy through the grid. The solution was masterful. And it was ours. We did not have to hurry things. The world had been without energy for seventy days power, it could wait a few more weeks. However many were necessary for setting the new standards of performance. The new rules. Whatever we needed to take control.

The demo we showed the commander and his team has been successful. A test in our internal grid. Engineers blocked the building's electrical system during the demo. Before the blockade, the solar panels generated electricity that vanished when leaving the building grid. After the blockage, the generation of our 'mini-power station' remained at 1MW. The measure at any point in the internal grid was the same. The electricity was transmitted without loss. We could not leave the general grid access open for the demo. Both the virus and the antivirus would have propagated at the speed of light through it. The time to restore the power supply was not right yet. That was something we ought to do so slowly, first taking control of all the major distribution nodes.

We were able to restore electricity in the world. We had managed to reduce the losses that had always existed in the distribution grids, by optimizing the transmission. We had the key that would bring back the energy to the world. The key to start breathing again, to grow, to live.

The commander wanted the code. If I had been him, I would also have given it a try. It's something he had to ask and I had to deny. Seventy days have changed the global landscape. The civilization that we all knew has crumbled. Most governments have fallen. My estimation that at least one third of the population must have died, has been corroborated by the commander. The Islamic nation controls a quarter of the world and the other three quarters are thrown into chaos. He acknowledged that the initial virus was created by the US Army as a weapon against some Islamic countries. There was a leak. The virus code fell into enemy hands several months before its activation, without its intelligence network being on record. Islamic countries felt attacked. They decided that the union would reinforce them. The Arab League encouraged a joint action. They formed an alliance. They created the Islamic nation, a united front against Western imperialism. For the first time, all the Arab states got united under one flag. One nation to fight against Western decadence, to put an end to its abuses. A nation that would not be trampled. That was the argument they used to obtain supporters to their cause.

American intelligence blamed everything on the eighth Hadith¹⁷, the holy war. They thought it locked in a war of religions. For them, the Islamic nation had declared holy war against the West. The final jihad.

The virus helped, but its spy network was certain that the idea had been long in the making. The Islamic nation concept had been germinating for decades.

They got the original virus code. They modified it in some way. Their technicians had not come up with whatever they changed, which prevented them from releasing the antivirus. They implanted it in the grids worldwide. Their spy network reported unusual activity in the whole area of the Arab states during these months. An increasing buzz in the terrorist cells. But they could not discover the scope or purpose of the activity until the sleepers awoke. Too late. The original team that developed the virus had all died in an accident. When the counter-virus attacked, none of the original team members remained alive and the new team could not develop a proper antivirus to annul the one amended by the Islamists.

As for the Islamic nation, they were convinced they already had the antivirus and had already set a date to restore the power in their territory. For the time being, the chaos kept working for them. It came in very handy. They had had the advantage of knowing the date when the sleepers had actually woken in the world. They had known it in advance. This allowed them to get organized. The millions of migrants, displaced for years outside their territories, were the key to organize the attack from inside, without moving troops. A brilliant move that allowed them to invade much of Europe and Asia. He also confirmed that the US was now the main objective of the Islamic nation. They did not want to invade the country, they just aimed to cause the greatest number of personal and material casualties. He would not give us more information on the situation in his country and of course, he reminded us that all he had shared was classified information. There should not be leaks.

There would not be. We wanted to be their allies. We shared the same goal. To recuperate the splendour, the power, the progress, the hegemony of Western civilization. To go back to the path of progress and welfare. There were three quarters of the planet waiting for a solution, for a return to normality. They just wanted to overcome the chaos in which they were immersed. They wanted a strong leadership. An alternative. They needed the energy that moved their world. And whoever gave it back to them, would have them eating out of his hand. It was time to react. To define the pillars of the new civilization. To create a new world order. To forget old territorial quarrels. The world, before the sleepers, had a major problem, overpopulation. There was an excess of two thirds of the population. According to his own data of casualties, now there was only one third of that excess left. With current technology and even with only a third of the world

population, we could achieve a much higher comfort level than the world had ever known. We should not make the same mistakes as our predecessors. The technology had allowed the world to be global. The borders were a scourge of the past. We had common goals, development, progress, knowledge, control. It did not take a large number of people to rule the world. All that was needed was a new structure. Now was the right time, the perfect time for the population to receive a new world order without riots. They were plunged into chaos. They wanted to return to normalcy. They wanted to get back their lives. They wanted to eat, to have water, energy to live, to grow, to enjoy. Whoever was able to offer that would have the population on his side. Without any struggle, without protest, without doubt, without objection.

What moved the world? Welfare. After more than a century of capitalism, humanity was ruled by simple parameters. They wanted to live well. They did not seek happiness. They did not seek harmony with their fellow neighbours or their environment. Hedonistic and selfish values prevailed among the population. They did not want to know what was behind their comfort. The actual cost of what surrounded them. The blackout had not changed the values of humanity. The only thing it had done was to confer a higher value to welfare, because they had all learnt something they did not know before: welfare could disappear from one day to the next.

During the last century there had been attempts to create supranational bodies to rule the world. The nationalist feelings, the struggle to take control over natural resources, had made such attempts fail. The approach had been wrong. Why create new transnational bodies when there were already multinationals with global presence, with interests that transposed the country borders, corporations with much more power than most of the countries? Large corporations were states in themselves. Those who pulled the strings of political puppets. We just had to choose the key corporations. The world could be organized around them. The corporations that would meet the needs of all humanity. We did not need that many. Altogether, they would not be more than ten. Ten major corporations to belong to, to adhere to. Humanity would get organized by specialties. Each corporation would take care of their workers as if they were their own citizens. In exchange for their work, their corp would provide them with welfare. They would cover all their needs, not just the basic ones. Humans needed leisure time to be creative. And creativity, along with energy, was the engine of society. The corps would be transnational cells distributed throughout the non-occupied world. Company cities scattered around the world. Cells in which its employees would live. Work nodes connected to the other productive units of each corporation. The corps would form, would shape the world economy. They would establish parameters for the exchange of production, against the production of other corps. They would design a balanced system of

compensation. Each corp would produce according to the agreed quotas. The quotas would have their monetary equivalence. The corps employees would produce and consume their own products. A worldwide captive market. It was perfect. Whoever did not belong to a corp would not have access to anything, nor energy, nor the progress or welfare, nothing. And of course, the corps and citizens of the corps, had to have a defence. It has always been a strategic sector. In the new world order it would remain so. It was so strategic, that it should be the one playing the role of supervision and control of a well-balanced production between the different corps.

That finally convinced him. It was not the time to go into more detail. He would make contact with the military command of the United States of America who, to our knowledge, it was also the new American Government. We had to wait for their news. They would arrive shortly. It had a good ring to it. The Peace Army. A world army, supervising the supranational power held by the corporations. Yes. It had a good ring.

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

Travel! Thou wilt find a friend in the place of him thou leavest; and fatigue thyself; for by labour are the sweets of life obtained.

To a man of intelligence and education there is no glory in a constant residence: therefore quit thy native place, and go abroad.

I have observed that the stagnation of water corrupteth it: if it floweth, it becometh sweet; but otherwise, it doth not!

Stories from the Arabian nights, "Noor ad Deen, Ali and Buddir and Deen Houssun"

Among them, they never speak in Arabic, except to communicate with me. They soon realized that I understood some words in Arabic. Need had made my brain dig them out from the memory banks and although it was not their language, they knew how to speak it and, more importantly, they understood my limited and not well pronounced vocabulary. They named basic things in Arabic, always coupled with gestures and their own language, which they called tigre.

They were Beja-xasa¹⁸, from the Hidareb Bani-amer tribe. They came from Arabia. They arrived to these lands thousands of years ago, after crossing the Red Sea. They were nomads of the desert, agee-zay¹⁹ who lived from cattle breeding. They bred camels and some goats. They explained that the men were four days away from the campsite with the herds, in an area that had water and grass for the animals during the rainy season. Rain did not bless their land for long periods of time. It arrived with the shortest

night and was gone in less than two moons. The men cared for the animals in the humid areas, where they could be found now. There they built damns, khors, to retain water from the river floods the sky provided them with. The tribe would be able to use that water to give to the herd during the rest of the year and to water the fields where they grew harob²⁰, the cereal with which, once ground, they prepared o'tam and kuskūs. We had also eaten it as a whole grain, as a sidedish to a meat stew. Husked and boiled, it was very similar to rice.

Their nourishment was based on harob and camel milk. Furthermore, it was a basic material for the manufacturing of everyday tools. With the straw they made brooms, brushes, baskets, small rugs... They also used it as forage for the animals when there was no fresh grass. I am not sure I understood what they drew on the ground. I think they were trying to explain that when they harvested it, they would bury the excess in holes where it would keep for several years. It made no sense to me, how could they bury it without the grain or the forage rotting?

The poultice they applied on my wounds to cure me was also made of harob. It was the base of an alcoholic drink they drank from time to time. They made it by soaking the grains of harob for a full day. They were then drained and wrapped in cloths, until they germinated. They dried the germinated grains. They ground them down to a powder, to come up with flour with which they prepared a bread they would bake in such a way that it had a hard crust on the outside but remained uncooked on the inside. They would dunk this bread in tea made with whole harob grains. They then let it ferment until it became a sort of thick beer with a texture similar to a paste. It was quite a standard fermenting procedure. The result, a paste with alcohol, that dilluted with some water they would drink at certain meals. The undilluted paste was what Bushra used to prepare the cataplasm she used on me. It was simple. She only had to add some herbs that she kept in several leather bags to the paste-like beer. I suppose the harob fermenting process stimulated the growth of some kind of antibiotic which was what had fought against my many infections.

Life at the camp was calm. I soon gathered enough strength to join the daily routine and help the women in their chores. I still slept in the tent in which I had been cured. It was Bushra's tent. Like the others in the camp, it was divided into four areas. The left side was reserved for the women in Bushra's family. The right side for the men. Her husband was one of the elders in the camp. The front area of the tent was used for daily chores and the back side, which was raised and separated by heavily decorated fabric, called te-saqwitis, was reserved for sleeping. During the whole time I was recuperating, I layed on the leftmost part of the tent, where I still sleep today.

The night before the new moon, in addition to the songs and the rababah there was dancing. It looked like a ritual dance. They were preparing

something. I did not have to wait long to find out what it was. At dawn we started to take down the camp. The rainy season had ended several weeks ago. During the dry season they needed to go to other lands closer to wells and springs, to have a water supply. Before the sun went down, everything was dismantled and packed, ready to be loaded. Just it had been in Al-khurtum. This time we were missing the camels.

The elderly waited sitting on the sand, looking towards the north. And in that gazed horizon, as if it were a hallucination, the shadow of a herd came into view. It was much bigger than the one they had sold in Al-khurtum. It was surrounded by a cloud of hot air that distorted the contours of the shadows we could see. It did not take them long to reach us. Or to get everything loaded. This time we were all riding a camel. There must have been more than one hundred.

Our leader, the man who had bought me, the sheikh , had arrived heading the group that had brought the herd. He yelled something and the caravan took off. My life as a nomad of the desert had just started.

* * *

Poitou-Charentes, France

The sea is like a black polished mirror. It's a dark night. Without the slightest glimmer of light. The sky is covered. Not even the stars can be seen. I can't guess where the boat is. Or where the rowboat that should pick us up is. If we were to leave here by land we wouldn't be able to. We have struggled to climb down, we would never be able to climb it back up.

The tide is beginning to go out. They should already be here.

The French resistance people were really good to us. They liked me. They said I had been the one that had decided to take the kid with us, despite not having enough food and being at the limit of our physical strength. That spoke volumes of me as a person. I was an altruist. What the world needed. All of us like to be flattered from time to time, although we know it's completely false. It makes you feel good. As if you were a true hero and not just an asshole, overwhelmed by events.

We rested in their camp during ten days. It was as if we were on vacation. During those days, we almost managed to forget everything we had gone through. The chaos, the pain, the human misery. The Robin Hoods or the Robinsons, as Maria called them, had plenty of game. We ate meat every day. They made their own bread. There were several springs around the camp that guaranteed permanent drinking water. The nights in the forest were warmer than in the Pyrenees or in the open areas we have traversed. As a ritual, bonfires were lit during the twilight. They gathered in circles around the fires. They sang. They cooked. They danced. They tried to forget how screwed up the situation was. On the forest borders, death awaited them.

They had no way out. They couldn't escape. None the less they emanated good vibes. With them, Jose seemed to recover his spirits. Back to being himself, he almost reminded me of the guy I used to know in our Madrid office. He joined the resistance morning training. At dawn they went to the circuit of the forest, they ran, made a table of sit-ups, pushups, climbing trees, climbing the rope..., he was in his element. He spent almost all day with the Robinsons, he even began to say a few words in French.

Maria and I spent a lot of time together. There in the forest, we had time to chat, to get to know each other. In two months we had hardly spoken a few words. The beginning of our journey had been hard. It had not been the best moment to speak, chat or tell the others about ourselves. Nor had we wanted to.

Maria was from Cadiz. She had a degree in energy engineering and a masters in renewable energy. She had studied at the Polytechnic University of Madrid, at the School of Mines. When she finished her studies she joined the research department of renewable energies at Iberdrola. She was certainly a brainiac. My resume was much less impressive. I was a mountebank. I had a marketing degree from the University Juan Carlos I. I had always worked in marketing departments, I was a party animal specialized in organizing parties to sell and publicize all kind of brands. Mainly youth consumer brands. Always going on a binge. Having fun. Spending spree. None of us had a partner. She also had brothers. We wondered what had become of them. What may have happened to our parents. The chances that they had survived were remote. We pondered over the future of the world. Over getting our old lives back. Over the Islamic occupation, whether it would last forever or if it was something temporary. We both agreed on trying to reach England. Jose didn't. When we talked to him about our plans he told us he didn't want to continue. He had been tempted to stay in Soria, but the prospect of reaching the Pyrenees and getting to a free France had made him keep going. He didn't feel like that now. He'd rather stay in France and join the resistance. He'd help others that, like us, may arrive to these forests. He needed some kind of stability. Feeling part of something bigger. This could be his new home. If he had to die, he preferred to do it there. We weren't able to convince him. Although I insisted, I only managed to get mad at him, but it didn't make him change his mind.

We started preparing our departure with the resistance's scouting party. They would accompany us to the northern boundary of the forest. They would leave us on the outskirts of Bordeaux. We would have to border it on the east to avoid crossing the estuary that could only be crossed with a boat, that we didn't have. Once we had forded the river Garonne, we should follow the coastline to the mouth of the Loire. From there on we should head to the North. We had about three hundred forty miles to Saint-Malo. We studied

the maps with them. The new moon was on October the 6th. That night the vessel that was going to cross the channel would anchor. And on the same night, as soon as the tide went out, it would weigh anchor to return to England. We had to reach the area around October the second, to establish contact with the resistance and organize our boarding.

We left the woods on the 12th of September. It sucked when I had to say goodbye to Jose. He didn't have many chances of staying alive in the woods. He had been a good guide, a good companion. He was a good guy. Things wouldn't be the same without him, but we would make it. Twenty days full throttle and we would have a foot outside France. We had to make an average of nearly nineteen miles a day. The land, we were told, was quite plain. The hardest thing would be to combine the trekking with the search for objects that could serve as a bargaining chip with the British resistance. They did not work for free. No one shipped without paying the toll.

We were given provisions for a week. That would allow us, in the early days, to be focused on finding something that paid our toll, when we were not walking. The reality is that the first week we found nothing. We crossed endless fields. We kept away from any population center and, if the sunflowers were not an accepted currency, there was hardly anything else to be found in those fields. In the most northern beach area of La Rochelle, we had quite a find. We found a farm. Abandoned. We were lucky to see it from the distance at dawn. We didn't know whether to approach it or not. It seemed that it was not inhabited. We couldn't hear any sound. There were no movements. We approached with caution. No one had mowed the sunflowers. They were tall and still not wither. They were a good shelter. Nobody would see us, even if they were within ten yards of us. The last stretch we did on all fours. Nothing. No sign of life. We decided to wait a couple of hours. See if when the day progressed, we observed movement inside. The sun was already high. It must have been noon. The wait had been long. In silence. I looked at Maria and said, "we've got the balls! Come on! Let's get out of the sunflowers our we will be here for the rest of our bloody life". We got up and left. Slowly. Looking in all directions. Back to back. My hand squeezed by Maria's hand. We approached the door of the farm. My heart was beating a hundred per hour. My ears rang. I felt the damp back of Maria against mine. I could even hear her heartbeat, mingled with mine. We tried to open the door. It was closed. We approached a window. I broke the glass with a stone and opened it. The two of us went in through the window. Maria refused to be left behind while she waiting for me to open the door. No one had entered the house for some time. It seemed as if it had been abandoned for several weeks. The floor was covered with a film of dust. So was the furniture. We had entered through the living room. We went into the kitchen, the pantry, the dining room. The stairs went to a first floor. There was no basement. We went upstairs. There were three bedrooms and a

bathroom. All covered by the same dust as downstairs. One bedroom had a bed covered with a white down comforter. It smelled clean. When we finished our search and confirmed there was nobody there, Maria returned to that room. She threw herself on the mattress. Facing down. I looked at her ass. It was perfect. I laid beside her. She turned on her side. I moved a lock of hair away from her eyes. She looked at me.

I hadn't had sex for months. My hand down her neck. My thumb stroked her right nipple. Over her clothes, I could feel how it responded back. My eyes, together with my hand, went from her waist, to her hips and her thighs. I looked into her face. Her mouth slightly open. Her gray eyes looking at me. She looked like a wolf on the prowl. My mouth shortened distance with her lips. I kissed her. Her hand in my lunch box, hard as a rock. While kissing I pulled off her sweater, her shirt, her bra. What a body! Pants with her knickers. Both disappeared. I couldn't recreate the sequence. A quick fuck. Intense. Memorable. What a difference it makes to know that tomorrow you may be dead and that this may have been the last screw of your life!

We fell asleep. After more than two months spending the night in the open, on rocks, grass, trees or whatever we found, bed captivated us. Naked under the duvet, we slept till dusk. We found some cans in the kitchen. After some dinner, we went through the whole house. Maria wasn't being a pain. She needed a screw as much as I did, and once the need has been satisfied, we were focused on what we had to do. If we got there empty-handed, they wouldn't let us board.

We found a jewelry box with rings, earrings, necklaces and a bracelet. They weren't expensive thing but we kept them anyhow. We also took some warm clothes. I found a pair of lined boots that happened to be my size. They were perfect. I could have made it with Pedrito's, but after so much complaining about the pillaging, it was Jose who had kept them for his use. We found a couple of real backpacks, no knotted plastic bags like ours. We put inside gloves, hats, scarves, all the cans we could find in the kitchen, a couple of knives, a hatchet, the jewelry and when we thought there was nothing else useful, a new finding, within the first find.

In a drawer, in the hall, there were maps of the area, a compass and a GPS with its own dynamo-type charger. That would pay for the trip of at least one of the two. The other ticket we still had to find stuff to finance it somehow, before we got in contact with the resistance.

And if we didn't find anything else... Who would embark?

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

Permaculture helps you decide where to put something so that it operates interrelated to other things. Whenever this does not happen, there will be problems. Each entry that is not automatically provided must be provided. Each output that does not go to the thing that needs it, must be eliminated. Therefore all the outputs that have not been designed, become pollutants and the pollution is an unplanned output.

All unmet needs represent work and all work represents the satisfaction of unmet needs. None of this would be necessary if you would have placed each item in direct relationship with its own needs and outputs.

"The Parable of the Chicken", Bill Mollison

Eight adults and two children. More than enough adults to deal with the children and to organize the work of the farm. David was still convalescing. The trip up the mountain shattered his plaster and also his leg. It was protected with one of those orthopaedic boots, but the sole broke and a few steps later, so did the cast. He didn't complain along the whole way. I bet he was in pain. When we arrived and managed to settle down, Paul took a look at him, at his ruined, stained and bloody plaster. The trip had burst the fragile soldering of the initial fracture. It was splintered again. For the

second time in less than two weeks, the bones had to be re-arranged. The screams, before he fainted, were heartbreaking. He cleaned the area and put the leg in a plaster again. Now he's still on bed rest and despite this, Paul thinks he will remain lame. He thinks it won't heal well.

Anselme and Megan have demonstrated a manifest inability to perform any outside tasks. But Megan has surprised us with a facet that none of us could have imagined. Behind her Barbie facade lies a spiritual dimension, grown and trained through meditation. She's a Reiki master. I had never really believed in the effectiveness of this type of healing but by using just her hands, she's able to relieve the pain of David's leg and she has gradually managed to start the healing of the broken kids' souls. It's true that they were very close to her. Megan was at my sister's almost every day. But it isn't just that they know her well. She has restored their faith in love, in tenderness, in people. She has shown them that not everything is pain. She's healed their spirit. She has bathed them with a new light that is reflected in their eyes. My nephews can speak again. Megan has managed to restore their vital energy. Something that Paul's medicine, however hard he'd tried, would never have accomplished.

And Anselme..., he's a frustrated chef. He told us that he had always wanted to run a restaurant, but the opening hours were highly demanding, he didn't have the money for the initial investment, the margins weren't great and his search for comfort coupled with his absolute risk aversion, had made him become a journalist. He took over the preparation of all meals from day one. He gets up at dawn to go looking for eggs in the hen-house and around the lake area. Some days he finds none, but he says he enjoys the ride. The ducks usually lay their eggs on the banks of the pond, in the tall grass. Sometimes they fall into the water, which invites him to have a morning dip. He says it's one of the greatest pleasures he has ever enjoyed in his life.

The harvesting of vegetables was left to Paul. In the kitchen there are always fresh vegetables, clean and ready to use. Paul not only collects the fruits of the orchard and the vegetables from the garden, but also herbs and wild fruit. The farm produces much more than we can consume and Paul, quite rightly, decided to start canning the surplus. In a kitchen cupboard he has found hundreds of glass jars. Jars of all kind of sizes, commercial jars. Perfect jars, with metal screw-type lids for vacuum packing.

It's funny to think about the useful life of things around us. In a normal situation, ordinary people would have sent all those jars to recycle. How much glass! It would have made them feel good. Citizens committed to environmental care. The system where we came from was intended for disposal. To shorten the lifespan of all the products around us. To convert them into junk and leave us with the need to consume again. We've been wasting energy for decades. We manufacture, buy, use, throw away and start

over. It doesn't matter that what we throw away is still in perfect condition. We want another size, another type, another colour. But alas, now the machine has stopped. We don't know for how long. What we know is that the jar already made, the processed plastic box, the clothing, the tools, anything that we can't build for ourselves, while there's no energy or production, is invaluable.

To make preserves, in addition to the jars, Paul needed salt and vinegar. In his search around the farm, he found several drums of vinegar, sacks of salt and sugar. They were in the dairy. They were things of great value. No wonder that salt used to be a currency in ancient times. The odd thing was this was practically the only food we found in the farm. It seems as if the previous owners had left with all its provisions. Not a box of rice or a can of coffee. Nothing already processed, but plenty of raw material to help with food processes. We have tons of vinegar, salt and sugar. That is going to solve many problems. With brine and vinegar, Paul is able to make preserves of all kinds, vegetables, pickled onion, apple, zucchini chutneys, blackberries, pears, plums, fruit jams, and even preserved eggs. Without storing them in the cold, most of the canned foods would last for six months. That left the fridges and the freezer, connected to the batteries powered by the solar panels, still at full capacity to store game meat, fresh eggs, fish and milk we would get from milking the goat after her delivery.

Ciarán and Dylan are the hunters of our 'tribe', as well as our scouts. Dylan was trained in the Army in survival techniques and guidance. Ciarán has always been a hunter. Since he was five, his father used to take him in his hunting trips. His specialty is the crossbow, which of course he brought along with him when we started the trip to the mountain, and he's also pretty good at fishing in rivers and lakes. So far they haven't used firearms. Dylan says he doesn't know whether we shall need them for our own defence. So he doesn't want to waste a single munition. With the crossbow and the lassos they have managed to hunt rabbits, squirrels, a fox, a raccoon, a bobcat and a wild goat. We always eat the small animals the same day they're hunted. The wild cat and the goat have become part of the winter reserves. They bled and skinned them in a clearing they have prepared up the mountain. They brought them down quartered and ready to freeze.

People who set up this farm had achieved a really high degree of self-sufficiency. It's connected to the grid but I don't think they ever pulled energy from outside, except maybe during the winter months. If we're still here by that time, we'll feel the cold. Not much. Vancouver's one of the milder climate zones across Canada. I don't even want to imagine if we were on the East Coast. There, we would have four or five months of permanent snow. Fortunately we're on the West Coast and we still have a few months of mild weather ahead. Before it gets cold we must optimize our consumption, getting to know the battery life, having the feeling of its charging and about

the consumption of each appliance. I miss a load and consumption monitoring system. That would help us a lot. The first day we ate down the batteries. Maybe we heated too much water, or maybe there was a leak in the system. We were forced to unplug the refrigerator so that the batteries didn't get damaged. It didn't matter that much, because at that point we didn't have anything that could go bad, but now we do. We have the meat they brought and I hope we can soon add some fish. Ciarán and Dylan have found a lake and several streams a few miles up the mountain. Surely they'll be able to get some kind of trout, salmon or whatever fish lives in these rivers.

Katsumi and I handle the planning and optimization of resources for the coming months. Nothing makes us think that the situation will soon be straightened. We have high chances of living here for quite some time. For us it's a fascinating challenge. I must admit that if I could forget the intricacies that have brought us this far, if I could delete the deaths, suffering, violence, pain, chaos, uncertainty, if I could remove that, I could say I'm happy to be here. I would like to stay forever. Make this place my home. We can think of many improvements in the design of the spaces in the farm, but they aren't a priority. At the moment we're focused on polishing inefficiencies, optimizing production and planning the collection of supplies for the coming months. The winter will be hard. The orchard with the fruit trees won't produce that much. Hunting and fishing will be scarce and even though the goat will give us some milk, and the chickens and ducks will lay some eggs, we can't rely on them for our survival.

The house doesn't have a true larder. We have decided to convert one of the rooms, the coldest, into a pantry. Katsumi found all kinds of tools in a shed next to the garden. He's already begun to cut down some trees and prepare shelves. We also want to build a greenhouse, a silo and prepare an artificial pond close to the orchard and the veg garden.

The greenhouse could be our own experimental area during the winter. Hopefully we could grow something and if we fail, at least it would be a good seedbed. It'd allow us to grow the seedlings for the next sowing season.

The silo isn't a must. At the moment we don't have any grain to store or animals to feed during the winter. But it's always good to have dry fodder for horses, goats and chickens. From November on, the rains will begin and it will get colder. We've found some warm clothes in the house, not enough for everyone. We will spend a lot of time inside the house and the fewer outings we need to do daily, the more comfortable and bearable our life will be. We have to plan our environment according to the intensity of use of each thing surrounding us. We can't afford to waste our energy and resources to travel distances that could have been avoided by simply thinking about the location of each thing from the beginning, or about the needs we'll have during the coming months. The silo will help us in feeding animals during winter. The best place would be next to the barn.

The pond isn't a priority either, but it would be nice to have it in full operation for next spring. The lake is far from the orchard. It would be nice to have frogs around, to control the insect population. The frogs will attract birds and the pond will attract ducks, which are now in the lake area. Frogs and birds for the insects. Ducks for slugs. So although the pond is not a priority, we should try to have it ready before the end of the year.

We have projects again. Dreams. Hope. Without dreams there's no life. Ours have arisen from the ashes, like the Phoenix. With the difference that the Phoenix has a cycle of five hundred years and today, I'd pay to have the certainty that nothing extraordinary will happen in the next five hundred days.

* * *

Monday, October 6th

Tokyo, Japan

The master Bankei's talks were attended not only by Zen students but by persons of all ranks and sects. He never quoted sutras not indulged in scholastic dissertations. Instead, his words were spoken directly from his heart to the hearts of his listeners. His large audience angered a priest of the Nichiren sect because the adherents had left to hear about Zen. The self-centred Nichiren priest came to the temple, determined to have a debate with Bankei.

"Hey, Zen teacher!" he called out. "Wait a minute. Whoever respects you will obey what you say, but a man like me does not respect you. Can you make me obey you?"

"Come up beside me and I will show you," said Bankei.

Proudly the priest pushed his way through the crowd to the teacher. Bankei smiled.

"Come over to my left side". The priest obeyed.

"No," said Bankei, "we may talk better if you are on the right side. Step over here".

The priest proudly stepped over to the right.

"You see," observed Bankei, "you are obeying me and I think you are a very gentle person. Now sit down and listen".

News of the commander did not take long. I received a radio call the day after our meeting. It was time to go into detail. The US government had given approval to strike up conversations with me. With us. They were not authorized to sign any agreement. But they did have the master lines of action. The margins in which the American Government would feel

comfortable. On their side, they had also contacted the major corporations that were still operating, including Crynf. Any communication with others would be now done through them. They kept contact with all the power centres that were still functioning in the world.

I was invited to move to their flagship, to stay with them for as long as we needed. It would be easier than moving their team to the outside. I could not refuse. It was virtually a kidnapping. Going to their ship made me their hostage.

I gave strict orders before my departure. If the talks failed to reach fruition and they were to require the delivery of the virus in exchange for my release, they should refuse. I knew I would die if we got to that point. If that were the case, I would not survive whether Tyo handed out the antivirus or not. It also was clear that my orders would be contravened if that time came.

Mental strength. My plan was brilliant. It really should not fail. I had no fear for my physical integrity. They would not attack Tyo to obtain it by force. They had more to gain with me than without me.

I had never before entered into a warship. To say it was Spartan was to give a touch of inexistent colour. I stayed in a cabin reserved for non-military. It was an outside cabin. I would not have minded if they had given me an inside one. I was not on vacation. I did not have the need for good views. Neither for superfluous comfort. Concentration. Without desires. Without deficiencies.

We held all the meetings in the wardroom. We started at eight in the morning. Never ended before eight o'clock. They wanted to hear my full statement. I began by reviewing what I already told them in our headquarters. The need for a new order. The obsolescence of the hierarchical structures prior to the blackout. The world had already entered into collapse before the blackout. The decline was at its zenith. Restoring the old values would only lead us to sink deeper into the mud. We had to reinvent a new society. To reshape the world. To our fortune or our misfortune, the blackout had solved one of the major problems of the 21st century. The abundance of cheap energy had been the main driver of growth and development in the 20th century. That same wealth had made the linear growth of the population become an exponential growth. The absence of energy in recent months, at the hands of chaos and war, was reducing the population to the levels of the early fifties. The army itself confirmed this information. We did not need more people. It was perfect. The technology would make up for the manpower shortage. The planet could sustain that population size. The shortage would not guide the course of the new economy. The welfare would take over.

Capitalism, free competition, the excess of supply over the recent decades... It did not lead to anything. The low cost the growing market

shares, the necessity to obtain high volumes, the advertising to make almost identical products and services stand out...It was all nonsense.

Why have thousands of companies offering the same shuttle service or the same electronic device or the same type of food? Thousands of companies competing with each other, clawing market shares, pulling down the prices. Converting their business model into a financial model, as the manufacturing or the service sector was no longer profitable. The profitability of the previous model relied on the proper management of cash flow peaks.

The world had been standardized. All consumers had sought the same. Some more affluent than others. Everyone wanting to live well. Having their basic needs solved. Enjoying an adequate level of comfort, of a sophisticated leisure and entertainment to evade their reality.

The leaders sought the same. Maintaining their privileges, their status. A standard of living and comfort far superior to that of consumers. They wanted to design, define and manage usefulness, the use of consumers within their system. Getting them to be their labour force at the same time as their clients. Their grateful servants.

The problem stemmed on deciding who would comprise the leadership. It was easy to reach an agreement on everything else. It was easy to find the best way to manage the masses. They would live according to the will of the ruling class. Their free will would be limited, but they would live well. They would have energy, food, water, work, and housing. They would be able to eat, study, play, and breed. In short, what they had always done, but with better quality because there would be fewer mouths competing for the same resources. I did not have the slightest doubt. The system would be better designed.

Who would be the leaders? Until a few months ago, governments, politicians, the military, various churches, the shareholders of large corporations, some senior managers of the multinationals... all were part of the ruling class. Today, barely any government was still alive. Why should we give the power back to those who had afforded the luxury of losing it? What did politicians bring to the table? Only inefficiency and corruption. It was a social class we needed to wipe off the face of the Earth. As for the Armies, it was clear. Only the strongest had survived. The United States was the best example of survival of the military forces of a country. They had managed to overcome the crisis and had taken control of the United States. They deserved to be part of the new ruling class. They had got it the hard way.

Religions, their ministers and their organizations..., how had they ever come to power, to wealth? How had they got their privileges? They should never have had them. They should never have held power. Their mission was to enlighten the spirit, not to manage worldly goods and get rich while they

were at it. There would be freedom of religion, but it would be bounded to the strictly private sphere. Churches and religions would not be part of the ruling class. They would not be part of the creation of the new order.

And corporations... They could be counted by thousands before the blackout. How many had managed to survive? To retain knowledge? To keep their employees alive? To safeguard their productive assets? Those who had made it were strong candidates to join the ruling class. They had demonstrated their management ability in times of adversity. Their ability to be in charge of the masses. Their philanthropy, their altruism, their humanity, their civic-mindedness. Those would be the standard bearers of the new era. The new pillars of the world.

The US Army had more information than I did about the companies that had survived. They had detailed reports over the cores of knowledge still standing, operational and ready to return to their activity once the energy was available again.

Most of those days were spent crossing their information with my proposal of the nine pillars for the new era; defence, transportation, energy, pharma&healthcare, natural resources&synthetic materials, information systems, consumer goods, food and leisure.

We did not need anything else. Any human demand would be covered by one of the nine pillars. All equally necessary. All equally strong. With a strong feedback among them. If one fell, the others would also fall. Nine pillars. Nine members on the Board of the new world order. Nine. An odd number. Essential to avoid conflicts in the voting decision-making. Nine. A number small enough for discussions not to turn into a waste of time, futile and counterproductive. Nine. Large enough to guarantee the diversity of opinions and points of view. Enough to enrich us through diversity but not unreasonable to prevent diversity from leading us to a conflict.

The relay of the defence pillar would be turned over to our hosts. They were the fittest. They were the most powerful Army. It was their right. They would be the new Peace Army. Defenders of the new civilization, of the corps pillars. The Islamic forces controlled a quarter of the planet. We could live with them, but we could not let them expand beyond the territories already occupied. We did not reach an agreement regarding this issue. My hosts were in full war. Their nation had suffered the most devastating attacks in history. They wanted to eliminate the Islamic nation, force it out of Europe as soon as they could. We went into a dead end that made us lose a full day. We decided to leave this open for further elucidations. Where we did get a quick consensus, was in the need to protect the ruling class of any external threat. They were the greatest exponents of the capacity and know-how. Their life must be defended above all other considerations. The Peace Army should be able to neutralize any imminent or future attack and in addition, be prepared

for any threat that may become feasible in the coming years. They would build weapons. They would investigate new warfare technology. They would train the militia of the other eight pillars and would supply them with the necessary weapons to meet its defence and production goals.

The energy, or rather the lack thereof, had brought us to the present situation. It was a key sector, but not the most important. The abundance of energy in the 20th century had led humanity to make mistakes in the design of their supply systems. Generation relied on fossil resources. Virtually all production came from oil, gas and coal. They were so cheap and so abundant that they had not taken the time to optimize the grids. The generation could be thousands of miles away from its consumption. It could even be in other continents. Huge networks and grids were put in place, but not only did they have continuous energy losses but they also undermined the logic of achieving efficiency and optimization of resources. Many times, the cost of transporting energy was higher than the final energy consumed. We were facing new challenges. Once and for all we should give up the dependence on fossil fuels. We should optimize the performance of the grid and above all, and that was the most important lesson learned from the blackout, the energy generation should be distributed. We should aim to create living cells that would be energy self-sufficient. The cities should not rely on centralized grids or on energy generated outside their influence area. The global distribution grids could be a backup; they could have a backup function in the event of a specific failure in an area, but could not be the arteries for the main supply. Each populated area should have its own power generation. Depending on climate, topography and their own natural resources, each cell should be capable of generating its own energy. Florida could not get their energy from northern Canada. And Spain could not be supplied from Libya. It was inefficient and inefficiencies, sooner or later, would demand the payment of a price we were not willing to pay.

The first thing we had to achieve was to take control over the global grids. When the time to reestablish the supply was right, it would not be done globally, not at the same time. We would follow our own schedule. That meant power. For the population to adhere to the corps, they ought to see a clear advantage in the adhesion, as opposed to the general situation. The energy would return, but it would be at the hands of the corps. Supply would be restored only in the cells that the corps would enable in each of the territories. Cities should not be supplied in full, the world at large did not need to be completely reconnected.

The control of the grid and the selective switch-on of each of the areas would make the people come to the corporations. Abandon their properties. Abandon the misery and insecurity in which they had fallen over the recent months. The chaos that had left them without food, without water, without heat. The chaos that had killed more than one third of the population. They

would be willing to give up what they had before, hoping to regain a life of comfort and the guarantee of safety and security. Private ownership in the hands of the mass population, as it had been understood over centuries, was an extinct concept. What was the use of possessions, when they no longer had any value, when they could not bring any security or welfare? A corps adherer should not own properties, not once he or she had joined the new order. They had to give up any prior property. Only the corps would have the right to private property. Ownership of productive assets, land, factories, natural resources, production cells, machinery, laboratories, transportation equipment or any property necessary for the corps production. Everything was now abandoned, waiting for someone to take possession of what otherwise would fall into oblivion and die.

The control of power grids would allow us to follow a programmed sequence of partial activation of the productive cells and maximize the adhesion of supporters to the new civilization.

There were several energy companies that had maintained their core knowledge and their facilities, more or less in good conditions. After deliberation, it was decided that the head of all of them would be Ener10. Their headquarters or matrix cell would remain in London. It was important to mark the territory. To protect the borders. To avoid abandoning bordering areas next to the occupied zone. Ener10 would lead the energy pillar. It would take ownership of productive assets that before the blackout belonged to other companies. That would allow them to get established in all parts of the world where production cells were required. They would investigate new sources of energy, they would adapt the local production to each particular geosystem, they would pursue the energy self-sufficiency of every production cell, and they would build the production systems and train the other eight corps in the installation, management and maintenance of their own production and distribution systems.

The establishment plan would be supervised by the Peace Army. We all expected this. Just as we knew that in many cases, the use of force would be mandatory in order for the nine corps to be able to take ownership of the assets.

To obtain energy, consumer goods, transportation, food, drugs or any product that the corps could produce, there was a need for natural resources, raw materials for manufacturing. A key pillar in the new order. Again it was necessary to analyse the mistakes of the past. A high percentage of synthetic materials came from petrol. To date, the over-exploitation of resources had endangered the viability and future of various industries. The supply for production should be guaranteed. It was a vital piece. The nine corps could not rely on finite or fossil resources. Their production should be based on resources that could be regenerated. They should avoid over-extraction of resources, not an environmental issue of course, it was simply a way of

optimizing efficiency in the new system. Production policies would be defined in line with the extraction and replacement policies of the corps.

The Army confirmed that several mining companies had managed to survive. Not too large. Their holdings were not significant enough, except perhaps a Russian company, Hreum. They were the owners of the largest mines of titanium and various heavy and precious metals in Russia and Asia. Its establishment would follow a similar process to the one of Ener10. The matrix cell would remain in Moscow. They would follow the same schedule of opening production cells in different world areas, with support from previously established companies that still had some of their facilities in good conditions, an off course hand in hand with the Peace Army, not only for the adhesion of supporters, but also for incorporating the needed properties and assets.

The natural resources pillar would investigate on new synthetic materials that do not depend on fossil resources. It would define the policies of extraction and replacement of natural resources in the different geosystems and ensure the exploitation and supply of production materials in each of the corps.

Three out of nine.

The talks continued for several days. By then I had already spent a whole week on the ship. The meetings were getting longer. I am absolutely certain that the commander with whom I met, after our talks were over, would hold conferences with the US government, with the military high command. For the time being we were in agreement. They appreciated my vision. They valued my contribution. The uncertainty over the future relationship with the Islamic world was still there. They did not share much information about the situation. What became clear to me is that the war with the Islamic nation was still ongoing. Both sides were using chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The second third of the population was dying, while we were defining the new world order. They had to put a stop to this. Avoid a complete extinction. It was a touchy subject, but I would have to return to it.

The days progressed and my presentation on the nine pillars kept going. It was time to talk about food. We were all aware that, over the past few months, one of the points that had been critical for survival had been the supplies of food and water. It was an important pillar. The corps should have control over their adherees' food supply. It is true that we had the advantage of having to feed only one third of what was required previously, but we could not waste resources. The land surface under cultivation ought to be the right size. Not larger, nor smaller than what we really needed. We had to rely on maintaining the natural resources to their adequate levels of replacement. This would require reforestation in many areas that were cleared during the previous stage. We would have to protect marine areas and some wildlife

parks. If we did not implement such policies, we could face a shortage of supply in the future. Thus the arable land should be bounded. The food pillar was to investigate the optimal performance of agricultural production. During the last decades, great advances had been achieved over the genetic modified organisms, the GMO foods, but a lot of time had been lost in trials and lawyers over the industrial protection of those advances. It was not necessary any longer. All the improvements, progress, results of the research, would be available to all Humanity, for the benefit of the population living under the corps system. This property now belonged to the nine pillars. We should follow the trail of research, progress in genetic improvement of agricultural products. The optimization of the meat industry. But we not only had to optimize production, we also had to improve its distribution. Again, the agricultural sector had grown counting on unlimited energy resources. With cheap energy that seemed endless. In recent years, this premise was no longer real, which had meant severe decreases in the production levels. Many decades ago, countries had lost their ability to be self-sufficient in terms of food. The population had gotten used to eating food out of season, exotic foods that were mostly imported from thousands of miles away. A standard purchase at a large grocery store was probably comprised of less than ten percent of local production. That was a mistake. A food chain locally sourced should be put in place. At least sixty or seventy percent of the products. This would optimize the energy consumption and avoid future problems over supply shortages. Once again the food pillar should investigate to adapt the production to the different geosystems, regions, climates and land types, as well as to progress in the genetic modification of foods to improve their resistance to pests and to incorporate extra benefits to our health care. This pillar would ensure the start up of whatever agricultural systems were needed to supply each corp cell. They would train the other corps to be self-sufficient in food and ensure the supply of seeds and breeding livestock for local production in every cell. There would not be refined and processed products such as those that were in the markets at the beginning of the 21st century, but then again, those products were not optimal for human consumption. We would implant a more natural diet with a lower level of processing. It would lead to greater effectiveness in production, in addition to an overall improvement in the population's health, therefore savings in healthcare.

The most advanced company in GMO and crop adaptation to hostile environments was Ducrot. They had no expertise in the breeding of cattle, but it could be easily acquired through adherees and small businesses that had survived and would be absorbed. They would all become part of the food pillar. They would contribute to the system. The establishment plan would be similar to the one implemented by the other corps and it would still have the support and help of the Peace Army. The matrix cell would remain in Phoenix, US, where Ducrot had always run its headquarters.

Another pillar with a high investment rate in research and development, R&D, during the past half century, had been the pharmaceutical and medical sector. The progress was obvious. Life expectancy had doubled over the past centuries. There were still some illnesses with no cure, but there were good palliative resources available for those cases. This research should keep progressing, especially putting the focus on the use of drugs that help to shape the behaviour and enhance the capabilities of human beings. Healthcare should evolve towards more decentralized models. Getting remote diagnosis to become a reality. Human beings needed to incorporate some improvements to their body. I would talk at a later time about my approach to human genetic enhancement. A world to explore in order to enable control over different areas of everyday life. Systems that would allow lowering costs and optimizing the performance of a society distributed over distant cells.

European pharmaceutical companies had fallen under the control of the Islamic nation. The Americans had failed to keep a unified front with their knowledge in this sector, and had, in fact, not been able to keep their laboratories in working order. The war with the Islamic nation had destroyed the laboratories as they were one of their main targets. However in India, there were some fairly cohesive pharmaceutical centres. The most interesting was framTgox. It had belonged to a Japanese group. Its headquarters had failed to overcome the months of chaos and uncertainty, but the Indian branch did. The pharma&healthcare matrix cell would be located in New Delhi, India. Again the establishment plan for the operational cells, once the matrix cell was up and running, would go hand in hand with the other pillars. They could absorb small laboratories in Brazil, which had remained in operation while they waited for electric power to be restored, and would incorporate medical equipment industry. The pharma&healthcare pillar would be responsible for the R&D for the defined strategy and for supplying the production cells with medicines and medical supplies. They would train healthcare teams in the rest of the corps and would develop remote diagnostic systems to alleviate the health infrastructure needs of the smaller cells or of those places far away from the medical units. Those units would be responsible for putting in place the health pillar in all the main production cells.

Although the new order was being conceived with a clear focus on optimizing energy consumption and minimizing the transport of goods and people between different productive cells, there would be an inevitable freight. It would also be necessary to have public and private transport for the people. Going into a recurrent discussion about the need to avoid dependence on fossil fuels was a waste of time. It was a topic where we had spent enough already. The transportation pillar would be responsible for researching and developing efficient transport systems based on the existing

energy solutions, responsible for optimizing the freight routes and the logistics of distribution. Mankind could not return to a dependence on private transport as it had in the past decades. The production cells should be designed so that the inhabitants of each cell would not need private transport within the cells. Inside them, they only would be allowed to move on public transport. Private transportation would be reserved for travel between production cells, only for adheres with the highest privilege levels. The transportation pillar would be manufacturing all means of transport. Through its distribution network it would supply the rest of the corps with the required public and private means of transport and would maintain the operational and transport networks between production cells in optimal performance.

Northern Europe had not been invaded by Islamic forces. They had received many refugees from Germany and France. Many engineers and industrial designers had managed to avoid the slaughter and had fled to Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. In Sweden, the headquarters of Krintu had survived. It is true that for several years it had belonged to a Chinese group, but just as it had happened in the pharmaceutical world, its parent company had failed to maintain cohesion during the months of chaos. It no longer existed. Krintu would lead the transportation pillar. It would count on the experience of the displaced Europeans who had migrated to Scandinavian lands and of course with the cooperation and unconditional support of Bronte, our ally. They had experience in manufacturing all types of transportation. Throughout the years they had shown their ability with flying colours. The matrix cell for transportation would be located in Malmö. The general establishment plan for the production cells would also include this pillar.

Six out of nine.

Time flew. There was so much data to analyse. So much information to process. I had spent years designing what I now had to present in just a few days. It was hard to concentrate my work, my thoughts, and my design in such a short space of time. We did not have more. The establishment plan should be closed before the end of October. We had to begin to restore the power quickly. The world needed to get out of the mess where it had sunk. We danced on the tight rope of complete dispersion of knowledge and extinction. We could not afford that to happen.

The news received by radio from our headquarters were not encouraging. The Seventh Fleet had helped us with some water and food, but it was not enough. Life had turned into a nightmare in Tokyo. The plan ought to take off. We did not have much time left.

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

Verily the works and words of those gone before us have become instances and examples to men of our modern day, that folk may view what admonishing chances befell other folk and may therefrom take warning; and that they may peruse the annals of antique peoples and all that hath betided them, and be thereby ruled and restrained: Praise, therefore, be to Him who hath made the histories of the Past an admonition unto the Present!

Stories from the Arabian nights, "Introduction"

We walked through the desert for four days. When the sun descended, the caravan would stop. We would not set up the tents. Neither did we make the enclosing structures to keep the camels in. The men would bring down the load and pile it up in one unique heap. The camels remained in a group, motionless. The way to achieve this was to leave them only three operating legs. They tied a rope braided with harob with ends made up of curved bones around one of the camel's front legs. They left them like this throughout the night, with a bent leg tied with a rope. It was impossible for them to move. There was no need for pegs or additional ropes. The camels would not flee, not even if the howling of the hienas was heard. Nothing would make them walk until the morning, when the tribe would resume its travel, after freeing the camel's legs one by one and placing the load on their backs again.

Likewise, the tribe did not need a specific structure to sleep on the floor. Fires were lit where women would prepare the meal eaten at sunset, where they would boil the indispensable coffee, and around which stories would be

told and songs sung before laying down to sleep on a rug made of, what else, straw from harob.

Life at the tribe was peaceful. Time was not of the essence. We would get to wherever we were headed whenever we got there. The scenery's stillness contributed to not being in a hurry to get to a specific place. The same dryness could be seen no matter where one looked. Sand colours, splashed with lighter rocks and stones. At times a certain hill would be rockier than the others, with scattered brownish stains. Plants that against all odds had adapted to life in absolutely adverse conditions. Just as the Beja had. Thousands of years getting used to extreme climate conditions, learning to live off a land that, at first sight, looked dead. But for the Beja nothing was dead. Converted to Islam in the 8th Century due to the pressure exercised over their land by the mamelukes, they incorporated Animist and Christian beliefs into the Muslim cult, as well as millenary traditions passed on through their legends, generation after generation. Legends of a proud and fighting race.

The trip to our new settlement taught me to respect the Beja. Their pride got under my skin. It gave me back my confidence in myself. This strong tribe, made up of fighting men and sweet and tireless women, had accepted me as one of their own. They took care of me. They loved me. They helped me. If they could see me like that, as a unique human being, then I must also be able to. I had to. My wounds healed. The sun closed them and the dry desert wind blew them away. They flew to the past and revealed an uncertain future embraced by my soul. Riding on the back of my camel, covered with the tunic and veils to protect my skin from the sun, I could breathe in and feel life flowing inside me, once again. The freedom and rootlessness that could be felt within the tribe opened my soul to a new life.

When we reached our destination, the men took the beasts and the women set up the camp. This time the camels and goats, which had come with us in our crossing, stayed relatively close to the campsite. Inside a real fence. No more nights on three legs.

I approached Bushra to help her set up her tent. She said no. She brought me to the heap with the loads that had come off the camels. She searched for a bundle and gave it to me. It was meant to be my tent. I was cured. I did not need any more care. I had to start my own life. Have my own tent. She would help me.

We set it up hundred yards away from her haima. It had the same four areas than hers. The greatest difference was the te-saqwit that separated the raised area, the one reserved for sleep. The one Bushra gave me had no embroidered motives. It was plain fabric. Without embellishments. Bushra saw me holding it and looking at her. She explained that the te-saqwit is embroidered by the women before their wedding and improved and added-

on throughout their married life. They usually depicted motives that, for the Beja, represent love and fertility. I would also embroider mine if I found a man with whom I wanted to join. She would help me. It would be the gift for my husband. It took me by surprise. Husband? I did not want one. No. I did not need a man. They could not force me to marry. Tears strolled down my cheeks. My hands shook. Bushra grabbed my arms. I need not worry. A husband would be my decision. Only if I wanted one. She calmed me down.

When night fell, the camp was up and running. Our routine went back to normal. The women cooked. The elderly talked, while having coffee. The children played. The younger women played with the little kids while they talked to the younger men.

We dined in turns, as we always did. We finished dinner, and put everything away. When the rababah arrived and his strumming intertwined with the voices that rose over the silence of the desert Bushra took my hand and led me to the sheikh's tent. It was the tent right in the middle of the campsite. Slightly larger than the rest, but with no more luxury than any other. The sheikh was sitting in the front area of the tent. In the area reserved for daily chores. Barefooted, with the white tunic highlighting his dark skin. He was sitting cross-legged over harob rugs and camel skins. He invited me to sit next to him. Bushra also sat down by my side. I had gotten used to a mix of Arabic, gestures, drawings and tigre in which Bushra and I communicated. I was a fast learner, but not fast enough to be able to hold a conversation with anyone besides Bushra. She acted as our interpreter that night.

The sheikh was a gentle man. He spoke slowly. He knew I could not understand him, but even so he looked me in the eyes when he talked. He was direct. Brave. Proud and modest at the same time. Hospitable. Used to being listened to and respected. A wise man. The conversation started with an exchange of blessings in the name of Allah. Once the formalisms were over, the sheikh said to me: "during this time you have had plenty of time to wonder why I bought you, what it is that we want from you, if you are a servant, tigre, or a free woman". Yes. I supposed you've asked yourself those very questions and many more.

It was chance, or maybe fate, what brought the sheikh to the slave market. The Beja do not buy human beings. They never have. Centuries ago, when they fought to defend their land from foreign invaders, they would take prisoners during the battles and then turn them into servants, tigres, but they had never traded with people. It was immoral.

The sheikh had travelled to Rabak to hold a meeting with the chiefs of the clan. The world was at war and he needed information. He was not going to explain to me today what was going on in the world. It was alien to the Bejas.

The important thing was that I understood my position within the tribe. Everything else could wait.

When he was headed to the meeting, crossing the square in Rabak, he saw a slave market. It was despicable. It was similar to the one the imperialist colonists had held in the main Northern cities during their occupation. Back then, the colonists sold coloured men and women. They humiliated them. They deprived them of their freedom, of their pride. Now the real owners of Africa sold the neo-colonists. Actually, just the female neo-colonists. The male had been murdered.

From a distance he looked at the contemptible spectacle going on at the square. Everything was grey. Obscene. It stank. He saw a new group of women entering. Naked. Dirty. They smelled of fear, pain and death. All of them except one. One of the women was surrounded by a blue aura. The sheikh was the tribe's spiritual guide. He had a gift. He could see the auras of any live being. He went closer to the improvised meat market to take a better look at her. That blue woman was a talisman.

A Beja prophecy says that one day, Al-Maghrib's roots would rise against the evil that had had them entrapped for so long. This would unleash the evil spirits, bred for centuries by greed and injustice. The jinns would invade the land of men, extinguishing all life from the face of the Earth. The prophecy says that one in three souls would perish under the anger of the jinns. Darkness would invade the world and the only refuge left for humankind would be a return to their origins, the hug of Mother Earth.

The Beja never turned their backs on the land. For more than five thousand years, others tried to conquer them. None succeeded. None were able to co-habitate with the hostility of their territory. Where others saw aridity and dryness, death and devastation, the Beja saw a land that gave them everything they needed; water, meat, milk, cereal. They saw their home. Allah dwelled on this land, as did the souls of their ancestors. From the first Beja that crossed the Red Sea to the last one that had departed on a pilgrimage to the camp in the afterlife.

Their land had been blessed by Allah, but when the time came for the prophecy to become true, even the blessing of the Supreme Creator would not be able to prevent the Jinns from finding the Beja. They would try to strip them of their water reserves, of their khors forage. They would decimate their herds of camels and bring fire to burn their haimas. Only one would be able to stop the jinns from entering this land. She with a blue light and a pure soul. She who had been persecuted for forty days by the jinns. She who the jinns could not kill. She would be the Beja's talisman. She would protect the land and its dwellers. She would bring wisdom and peace.

The sheikh told me that from the very moment he bought me I stopped being a slave. He asked my forgiveness for whipping me while we were on the

boat and the harsh treatment I received in the first few days. He had to do it so as to not raise any suspicions. I was a free woman. The blue light and the pure soul mentioned in the prophecy. The one that would enlighten the Beja people. I could leave whenever I wanted but the prophecy was true. The jinns circulated the Earth freely. Darkness had taken over the world. News from Rabak confirmed that death and desolation had already wiped out more than a third of the population. I would only be a Talisman within Beja land. Outside, not even me, with my blue aura, would be safe from the jinn. I would die.

How could I believe this? It seemed like it had been taken right out of the fantasies recounted by Schehrazada to the Sultan during the Arabian nights. I was a talisman, a shield against evil spirits that had been unleashed by a world war. I thanked the sheikh for his hospitality and his sincerity. I requested permission to return to the main campsite. I had to think about all I had just learned.

* * *

East Portlemouth, UK

To the north, there's a community where they could take us in. Some geeks who have spent years preparing for a world without oil. They belong to a larger network, cities in transition. It's the only haven of peace. It's not controlled by any tribe. The community has its own elected assembly. It will be difficult to enter. Hopefully, Maria's knowledge will be our key to access the community.

The terrain to reach the forest of Saint-Aubin was just as the explorers of the resistance have told us. It was easy to cover the distance to get to the forest. Maria and I were totally in synch. Our first encounter was followed with more. We continued advancing during the down-light-peak hours and resting during the day light. We were looking for protected sites to camp. Preferably closed spots. We would be really tired on arrival at any of them. We had set a tough pace. Everyday we fell sleep shattered. We used to sleep about six hours. With three watches. There were times when between one watch and the next, a look, a brushing of the hand, a smile... was enough to get us in heat. Other days it was at the end of the guards, before eating our main meal. We couldn't spare our time in games. We were still vigilant, alert. We were in hostile territory but our desire would be more powerful. I had never experienced such a policy of quick fucks like the one I had during those days with Maria. Adrenaline was the main drive. We lived intense moments. Hazardous. Uncertain. Sex was an outlet. In addition there was complicity, comradeship. The kisses, the hugs, the caresses were comforting. They put some distance on what surrounded us. They built barriers to protect us. Above all, Maria was a machine. Active. Sensual. She liked to take the

initiative. To turn me on. I get an erection whenever I remember those screws.

At dawn, on October the 2nd we reached Saint-Aubin. The resistance had given us different shibboleths for three days in a row. We had to arrive on those days. If we were delayed, we would not be able to ship on the 6th with the new moon. We would have to wait a whole month to get another chance. The resistance of the Saint-Malo area had been informed about us. They had sent a carrier pigeon. They were waiting for us. It didn't take long for them to show up. They emerged from the forest without notice. They had been completely camouflaged. "Stop in the name of the king". "Death to the kings. Death to the tyrants. Death to the nobility". That was the watchword for that day. French people were just like that. Nostalgic. They thought they were still fighting in the French Revolution or against the German occupation. Needless to say, we didn't give a damn for their nostalgia. They were the only way to establish contact with the English vessels, the passport to exit the occupied zone.

Their camp was very similar to the one in the Gascony forests. There were fewer. They told us that almost everyone had left. As the weeks passed and the situation didn't change, many had lost hope and had taken ships to England. They never got to be more than a hundred. The first days of occupation were a slaughter. Islamic forces killed all the civilians they could. Those who were able to escape, took refuge in the woods. Step by step, the resistance group was formed and they established contact with sailors. Some were English, some were French who had managed to flee with their boats. It was not until August when the first English ship arrived. At first there were vessels arriving every two or three days. The population that had survived the hell wanted to leave, but little by little, the number of people who wanted to cross the channel was diminishing. Not because they wanted to remain in France, but because there were no more people to cross. The last collection was done during the full previous moon and, after ours, the next wouldn't take place until the following month. Expeditions were being scheduled further and further apart. Not only in this area of the coast, also further north, where British ships had arrived to transport those who were fleeing.

Times were tough. There were shortages of everything. The sailors had to make a living. We would have to pay a toll. They knew that we had been informed of this by their peers in Gascony. They wanted to see what we got.

After our first finding there weren't any more. We crossed the fields, far from any population, which didn't give us much chance to get anything of value. We showed them the GPS and its charger. They agreed to what we already knew: that would pay one toll. We showed them all the jewellery, the knives, the ad.

They would keep the jewels. They weren't of great value but they would give them some use. They were melting gold and any small amount was welcomed. They knew that their peers at Gascony hadn't told us anything about this, but the situation was fucked up for everyone. They were helping us, they were going to organize our exit from France. That deserved a payment. Whenever the time came for them to leave as well, they could not go empty handed. We were not in position to argue. We had to agree. They kept the jewels, the ad and the knives.

They looked at the rifle. The one that had caused the disagreement. It was still with us. Our most valuable asset along with the box of ammunition. Only one had been used. The one Pedro, the asshole, took. They said the rifle and ammunition would pay for the second passage. That left us helpless. But after all, we were going to a country that had not been occupied. In the UK too many people had died because of food scarcity and pillage. When they began to establish radio contact with the mainland and had got to know about the Islamic occupation, even more people died. There was a massacre over all those suspected of professing Islam. Popular martial trials condemned over a million Pakistanis to die, both natives and descendants. They blamed them for the situation. They accused them of having sunk Europe into chaos, into darkness. It didn't matter that they hadn't participated in anything. That they weren't aware of what had happened. They died anyway. Everyone was a rival. A competitor in the search for food, water. Any excuse was good to finish with them.

Popular judgments spread all over the British Isles. Their governments were leaking. The situation had gotten out of hand. The armies had not able to control the population who, in just a few weeks, took control over everything. Each village had its own committee, which was usually formed by those who had managed to seize power quicker than the rest, through the use of force. The committee decided on all matters: on rationing food and water, on the division of property of those who had died or left, on those who were suspected of violating the common good, on who should be trialled for any offense that the committee considered punishable ... The population in Great Britain and Ireland got re-organized into clans. They were violent. Cruel. They fought among themselves for the control of the land and food. We were told to stay out. It would be best if we wanted to preserve our lives.

They contacted with the ship's captain. They called him with a radio that seemed to be working as if by miracle. "*Boisaubin calling La Lutte*²¹, *Boisaubin calling La Lutte*". They established communication. They agreed on the price with the captain. He was also French. He had been a wealthy guy. He had his cruising vessel in the port of Saint-Malo. During the first days his entire family got killed. He managed to escape, to save his life, but the ghosts kept chasing him. He had become a sullen man, tormented. It was better not to engage in much a conversation with him. La Lutte would anchor

to the west of Cape Frehel the night of the 5th to the 6th of October. We should be there before midnight, before the highest tide. It wasn't very sheltered so they would not remain anchored for long. If we were not at the agreed point at the agreed time, they would weigh anchor and leave. There would be another ten people. All were warned. When the tide began to fall, La Lutte would depart. We should be careful with the watchtower at Fort La Latte. It was an old castle, situated a couple of miles east of the cape. Islamic forces had taken it. It was one of the watchtowers of the Muslim army.

We weren't in the forest of Saint-Aubin for more than four days, but time became eternal. Maria and I were always together. We didn't like the people of that faction of the resistance. They were pissed off. They were crossed with the fact that we would be leaving and they were stuck there. We kept watch while we took turns to sleep. We were afraid of being attacked, that they'd steel what we had to pay our tolls, that they'd kill us. The truth is that our guards wouldn't have prevented it, but somehow they gave us confidence until the fifth day when we left the woods. It was around four in the afternoon when we left. We were accompanied by a resistance guy. The rest never even said goodbye. He said it would take almost six hours to get to Frehel.

The cape was crowned by an unlit lighthouse, just like everything that was fed by electricity. Approaching those rugged coastlines needed seamanship skills and a very good knowledge of the coast. Fortunately for La Lutte, the night was dark. The new moon cast no light into the darkness of the night. We went down to the cove on the western side of the lighthouse, which was beyond the scope of the surveillance of the fort. The descent was fucking hard. It was a vertical wall of about two hundred fifty feet. Well at least that's what it looked like from the top. We really had no other choice, so we started to descend. We didn't have to abseil, so it wasn't as vertical as it looked, but anyhow it was dodgy as hell. The resistance guy that had led us to the lighthouse said goodbye there. He was pissed off, grumpy, unsociable, elusive. We managed to snatch an '*a tout à l'heure*²²'. Nothing else. No wishing us good luck. No recommendation of how to get down safely. Not even a handshake. Nothing. Zero friendliness.

When we reached the bottom, the other ten people were already waiting. We were greeted with knives in hand. No one trusted anyone any longer. We kept the same revolutionary watchword that we had on the arrival to the forest. When we said our part, the knives went down. Not without misgivings. We all had one eye on the rest of the group, the other placed in the sea. We looked to the north, distressed. There was no boat in sight. What if they didn't arrive? What if we had to stay in France?

The flood tide came in. The moon held it just about. The tide seemed to start emptying. We still couldn't see the boat. In fact, the absence of light didn't allow us to see anything. Maria made a sign. She pointed to one of her

ears. A different noise could be heard. An incisive sound of the sea surface, accompanied by a noise similar to the ringing of small bells. La Lutte came out of nowhere. Its sails were black. Its hull blue. It was a shadow in the night. Hardly visible. It must have been forty feet.

As part of the crew dropped anchor, others lowered something like a rowrib. Two sailors rowed up the rocky coast. When they were close they threw us a rope. We held it. We pulled to bring the boat close to the rocks where we were waiting. We boarded fast. We couldn't waste time. Someone could spot us at any time. We climbed to La Lutte from her stern. Again part of the crew hoisted the rowrib that had picked us up, while others weighed anchor, shrouded in darkness, guided by darkness. They seized the moment of calm waters before the turn of tide. With perfect coordination, the crew hoisted the mainsail, unrolled the Genoa and sailed north northwest. The hull began to slide through the murky waters of the English Channel. A cool southwest wind allows La Lutte to get some speed. We hadn't sailed more than two miles when the captain approached the group. He was in his forties. Without preamble, direct, with very bad manners, he asked us, one on one, for our toll goods. Each one gave him the belongings that the resistance had agreed with him via radio. All but a couple. They should have brought a bar of four ounces of gold. They explained to him that they had been assaulted on the road to the lighthouse. They were not deceiving him. They had been mugged. He asked them if they had something that could pay the price of the toll. They didn't have anything. It was an imperceptible gesture. Two sailors grabbed the man and another two the woman. They threw them overboard. Their cries ripped the stillness of the night. We weren't far from the coast. They would probably be able to swim back to land. No one spoke. We only dared to give the captain sidelong glances. With fear. We didn't want to make direct eye contact with him.

At dusk the English coast appeared at the bow. We had our landfall in Salcombe Bay. We approached the coast in the same rowrib that had collected us in France. We landed on the eastern shore of the estuary. Each went his own way. We never got to know the name of our companions, of the eight who landed with us, neither of the two who were stranded at sea, in front of the French coast.

Maria and I still had some supplies. Since we left the house where we had found the GPS, we had rationed our food. That gave us a certain leeway for the first three days in the UK.

We had to find somewhere where we could be accepted. A place to settle down. A clan. A tribe. Any group that could protect us until the world returned to normality. A group where we could contribute to their work with our knowledge. A community we could join.

The world had become a very dangerous place. The few scruples who survived the end of the century, disguised as laws and regulations, vanished the day everything went off. The world was governed by the law of the jungle. We both knew that alone we wouldn't survive.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

When raised commercially these chickens are cooped up in long rows of small cages not unlike cells in a penitentiary, and through their entire lives their feet are never allowed to touch the ground. Disease is common and the birds are pumped full of antibiotics and fed a formula diet of vitamins and hormones.

...

I let two hens and one rooster loose to run wild on the mountainside and after one year there were twenty-four. When it seemed that few eggs were being laid, the local birds were busy raising chickens.

"The one-straw revolution", Masanobu Fukuoka

The family grows. This week, Renée has had two kids. The children had already named the mother and now, they have also named the babies, Mickey & Minnie. Definitely my sister let them watch too much TV, too much Disney Channel. Fortunately they're much better, thanks to Megan. They still don't understand what's going on, however they have adapted to our life here, surrounded by nature. It gives them energy and joy. They like chasing the ducks, running with the dogs, climbing the trees, helping in the garden, collecting fruits and now, they also enjoy taking care of their goats. Tony takes care of Mickey and Ann loos over Minnie. They had a first class midwife. Paul helped Renée to give birth. A few days ago he realized that her vulva had begun to secrete yellowish mucus and her udders were very swollen. The day before she went into labour she began to behave in a

strange way. She was nervous, she looked at her belly and tried to sabotage it. She would lay down to stand up right away. She kept licking her parts while moaning like a lost soul. That night, Paul slept in the barn with her. Renée was a very valuable asset. We couldn't afford to lose her. Paul says it was an easy delivery. The heads of the two kids came first. He just had to give a little pull to the front legs to help them out. They were born within twenty minutes. A little iodine where he cut the umbilical cord and the rest he left to nature and of course, to the hooves of wise Renée. She must have been exhausted from the effort. Paul says she drank a full bucket of water when she finished cleaning her young.

The first three days we let the babies enjoy Renee's milk exclusively. They needed to get stronger. To get their mother's natural defences through her first milk and colostrum, but we also needed milk in our diet. Yesterday I milked her. Thank god I had done it before in Japan, at the school. I remember it took me a while to get the hang of it, despite having a person explaining in detail how I should do it and whom I could watch while she milked another goat right next to me. Had it been my first time, I don't know if I would have ever gotten anything out. But it wasn't, so I did it. I got almost half a gallon. I boiled it. I was the only one to try it. If the kids were allright, it should be okay for us as well, but it was better to be on the safe side. Four hours went by and I was still in perfect shape. The milk was really good. I boiled it again and I prepared a glass of milk and sugar for the children. It was like watching them having candy, ice cream or the best of treats. They asked if they could have more the following days. Happiness crossed their faces when I agreed. It was a priceless moment.

Mickey and Minnie will keep on sucking for at least three more months but within fifteen days they will start to eat plants, which will give us more milk for our own consumption. Now I'm milking Renée twice a day. At seven or eight o'clock in the morning and at seven or eight o'clock in the evening. I almost get a daily gallon. A luxury that won't last forever, but until is gone we'll enjoy it. We have more than enough for the children to drink milk every day and we have a surplus to freeze and to make cheese. We still have to use the brand new farm's dairy for the first time. I'm sure soft cheese isn't that hard to prepare.

The other joy of the week has been finding chicks. The chicken that Anselme thought was sick, because she barely moved, had no other disease than to be broody. I should have imagined it or better yet, checked it out. Since we arrived she must have been incubating. Four beautiful chicks have been born. When we discovered them, they must have already been a few days old. Otherwise the hen wouldn't have let them leave. Usually chickens keep incubating the chicks for a few days after they hatch, lest they die of cold.

They already walk around the hen-house. We have had to place new troughs for the littlest. The ones already in place are too high for them right now, they will reach them when they are able to jump. For the moment we are feeding them with the grain that we found stored in the garden shed. We are reserving it only for the chicks. The hens and the rooster eat almost anything, from worms and earthworms they find in the soil, to the rinds of fruit we give them. All spiced with plenty of clean water and some salt scattered around the hen-house. But the chicks will still need the grain for a few weeks. There isn't that much and it will be hard to get more in this area. We could feed them with corn but I'd rather keep it for our own flour. The animals can eat many other things. Katsumi has found several types of oaks in the forest. Before long, acorns will mature and we will be able to collect enough to prepare fodder for the whole year. He has also found walnuts. The nuts can be stored for months. With the shells of those we eat, we are going to try to prepare fodder or even flour. We will have to be careful when we try it. We've found a mill in the kitchen. It's designed for grinding grain. Perhaps the walnut shells may be too hard and we have to save it for the corn. Quite a find! I think I had once seen a grinder like this online, but I had always thought that making your own flour didn't have a high marginal utility. Much less with a manual grinder.

It's funny how your life can change in just a few days. We all took for granted the fact that the global world in which we lived wouldn't stop working. That the transportation of goods, at a higher or lower price, would remain *ad eternum*. Same with the food. If the flour price went up, it would only be a matter of cents. Nothing that would stop us from buying it. Perhaps if the price rose too much, it would mean that you didn't buy it as often. It would become a little luxury that you could continue to have from time to time, but you wouldn't have to give up buying it altogether. Thinking that the food would no longer be on the shelves of the supermarkets, that we would have to live on what we could find in the city streets or on what we could grow or harvest in nature. I think that no Westerner could ever have imagined that.

It's true. We had energy problems. The peak of oil prices, scarcity of raw materials, huge inequalities in the world, environmental degradation, the problem of waste. We had spent decades predicting the global collapse but like in a juggling game, the plates kept spinning on the top of the crumbling pillars of a rotten system. At least they spun for the first world countries. The Western excesses were being still supported by the rest of the world, who saw how we kept plundering their land, their wealth, how every day they became poorer, so that a few in the developed world, could keep the nonsense of growth without limit. The irrationality of a species that saw itself as superior. An intelligent species that in its stupidity was destroying its own habitat. Our world. Was it the sum of all these factors what had caused this situation?,

Could it have been because of the energy shortages? Or as the Government said, was it an Islamic attack? The reality has been distorted for so many years by the media, the Governments, the transnational corporations, that it was difficult to discern what was true from what was a lie. The reality they broadcasted was fiction. We can only trust our own reality, the one each of us constructs and lives in.

Surviving in this farm is now our reality. The reality of the neo-tribe we have become.

* * *

Sunday, October 26th

Tokyo, Japan

A student of Tendai, a philosophical school of Buddhism, came to the Zen abode of Gasan as a pupil. When he was departing a few years later, Gasan warned him: "Studying the truth speculatively is useful as a way of collecting preaching material. But remember that unless you meditate constantly, your light of truth may go out".

I had been confined in the warship for too long. I needed to leave, to feel that I was not locked, that I was not in prison. This routine made me feel like a caged cat; from the cabin to the meeting room, then back to the cabin, only a short walk away, always being watched. I talked to the commander. His response was firm. It was impossible to think about taking a break from the talks before the establishment plan was closed and ready for deployment.

The meetings went on. We continued with the definition of the three remaining pillars. Technology had been a main factor in the globalization of the world. Communication networks had shortened physical distances. Internet was a source of knowledge available to the entire Humanity. Anyone could access the free world library from anywhere in the world. The greatest knowledge centre of the planet which, in turn, was the main market for trading as well as the favourite meeting point for different communities. Internet meant power. The information was power. Those who had it knew this. Since the birth of the Internet, governments had tried to control access, the type of use made of the network. Because of its ubiquity it had not been achieved. Governments had limits, borders. Internet did not. Some companies, in the sector, had managed to reach a significantly interesting

level of control thanks to the services they offered. One was Crynf. In only twenty-three years, it had made it into the list of the top ten largest companies in the world. Before the blackout, they managed information on over a billion people. Information about their habits, residence place, their most frequent contacts, preferences, tastes, desires, free time, major suppliers. They always reassured their customers that information was treated in a statistical way, never down to a personal level. It was not worth going into more personal details. The information was priceless. To have the systems to collect and process it was even more valuable. Crynfplex was still in operation. It would be the pillar on information systems. They would investigate improvements in communication technologies, media, geo-positioning systems and real-time information crossing systems. The world was global. No more borders. Having the right information at the right time meant a huge advantage. All production processes would benefit from the use of such information. As for the media, I would just say the media we had suffered until today had become a mere trifle. With time it had turned into the channel for the Governments' propaganda, always controlled by the proper lobby. Information must be objective, truthful. The information systems pillar would be responsible for generating the appropriate content for each worker's privilege level in the various corps. Not everyone should have access to all the information. Reading it and digesting it would be a waste of time and it would get in the way on their concentration at work. This pillar would be responsible for maintaining the communication networks, supplying the corps with all the necessary communication systems and training the communications managers in the other corps. They would create mobile and land accesses to the information networks and provide the necessary information content according to the established policies. This pillar would also have to develop gateways to communicate with the genetic modification modules that would be incorporated to those who adhered to the corps. Yes. The modules that I had mentioned last week. Each person would have and implanted ID code, which would register the acquired privileges depending on his or her training and contribution to the system and to the corp. This personal ID would have different uses in daily life. It would be an interactive module that would allow access to general information systems, both to get information from them and to give feedback about working hours, preferences, consumption, habits ... Defining the information to be exchanged would be another function resting on Crynf corp.

Crynfplex would remain as the matrix cell. The implementation of the other cells would follow the general establishment plan. As in the case of energy, it required a preliminary step; to take control of all the communication networks. It would be done at the same time as we took control of the grid.

We had gone over the great needs of Humanity, but mankind also had small necessities. Clothing, footwear, household items, the computers that gave access to the network, mobile devices that enabled a 24/7 connection to the digital world, furniture, tools, toys..., elements that required a great volume to achieve an efficient production. In this front, those who had always shown leadership and ability were the Chinese.

The Army confirmed that many consumer-good factories were still in good shape, in working order, and awaiting only the reestablishment of electric power. They all belonged, to a greater or lesser extent, to the former Government. Unlike in other countries, it had not been completely torn apart. They had established contact with some Chinese military officials. The country was plunged into chaos, like the rest. The power shortage had caused hundreds of millions of deaths. The Army had failed to contain the masses that, as in other parts of the globe, were organized in tribes or gangs engaged in systematic looting. However, the Chinese military high command, which was still cohesive, was of the opinion that, following the drastic reduction of the population, if power was restored they would be able to reestablish order relatively quickly, run their factories again and be operational in a short period of time.

The Chinese high command would operate from Beijing. It would lose its military status. They would have their matrix cell in Beijing and it would be called China Co. Its activities would focus on the manufacture of consumer goods. They would cater to all the corps. They would define sell-by date policies and establish the access policy for the temporary purchases of products. Only the corps would keep the ownership of productive assets. The adheres would not have access to private property, they would be able to enjoy consumer goods, as well as all the services offered by the corps but rather than in terms of property, in terms of temporary access, a sort of rent or usufruct. The expiration of this access would be defined by the nature of the service or product, by the lack of the adheree's privileges or by a change in the consumer policy. All adheres would consume the products of China Co. They would have freedom of choice over which products to acquire or which not, but the offer would be determined by the corporation. Access to the products would be guaranteed by the module of genetic improvements carried by the adheres. Any unmodified human would not have access to any service or product created by the corps. The first privilege, the principal one, basic to any human being, was to be an adheree, to have the corps' genetic enhancement module implanted. Without that, they would not exist. They would not have energy, food, water, shelter, education, health. They would have nothing. If one did not belong to the corps, he or she would have to live under the law of the jungle, the animal law. They would remain wracked in the chaos in which Humanity was currently immersed.

But, which corp was in charge of genetic enhancement? The ninth corp. The pillar of entertainment. The pillar that would work to make life within the corp easier, more enjoyable, more fun, simpler. The pillar that would open virtual worlds to all adherees, beyond their physical existence. Mankind needed recreation. Without entertainment, fun, human beings became inefficient, they would lack initiative and creativity. Strengthening these two factors was crucial to ensure the performance and the productivity improvement in each of the corps. Life should have incentives. Some could get those incentives in their physical environment. They had skills which allowed them to excel in sports or group activities, but that was not the case for everyone. The ability to establish relationships had been quite compromised in the last decades. The cities had created impersonal beings, incapable of holding a conversation or having a relationship with other people closeby. However, the anonymity of virtual worlds allowed them to overcome their inhibitions. The corps should enhance and promote the existence of virtual worlds where their followers could take refuge and build the lives that they would have liked to live, but for one reason or another never did. So far technology had been an obstacle for the creation and development of new leisure alternatives. It had not been able to follow the pace to new ideas, new proposals. From now on this would change. Tyo had spent years designing integrated electronics for human bodies. They had made great advances in implants that, far from being rejected by the body, were absorbed and assimilated by the nervous and cognitive systems and were able to communicate with external systems, whether artificial or partially human. Tyo modules had been developed to exchange information with any module implanted in other living organisms and they could receive and transmit information to external networks, whether public, such as the Internet, or private, such as the network at any corporation. The modules were fully interactive. They integrated technology for mobile and wireless communication and provided a series of improvements to the human species that would represent a substantial leap in evolution and performance.

Tyo had focused its research over the last few years in four areas; modules designed for their integration into the human optical system, that granted the ability to view digital information via the optic nerve, the integration of storage modules, both for personal life experiences and information with no relationship to their experience, very useful for training and education, modules for the improvement of human physical performance that control the rhythm of the cardiovascular system, the rate of generation of toxins and the generation of glucose from food and the fourth line, the external communication modules that I had explained earlier.

The uses were endless. A human being with all the modules implanted indirectly became another animal species. The modules themselves were the evolution of the homo sapiens, the genetic enhancements would give rise to

the homo corps. Strictly speaking, from a biological point of view, this was not true, as the modules were not integrated in the DNA. The modules were not mutations transmissible through reproduction. It was one of the main requirements in their design and should remain so. The privileges of belonging to a corp ought to be removable. In the event an adherer left the corp, genetic improvement modules would stop functioning at the exact moment indicated by the corp, causing the malfunction of the body in which they had been implanted. If someone fled or deserted, the corps could make him die in less than 48 hours. The modules incorporated a geolocation system that would give the whereabouts of every adherer and allow communication with the genetic implants through our satellites.

Tyo, with Bronte, would lead the entertainment pillar from its headquarters in Tokyo. We would keep investigating genetic enhancements to optimize the integration and performance in the corps as well as creating virtual worlds and digital clouds so that adherers could have access to those other lives that would fill any void that their real lives could generate. This closed the nine pillars. Once the corp elite was defined, they would be the first to receive the genetic enhancement modules. The elite would have access to the four modules. Adherers would have access to a minimum of two. The communication and identification module would be the basic one. It would be deployed throughout the world to any person who wanted to join the corps. Depending on their work and responsibilities, they would have access to a greater or lesser number of modules and applications on the implants.

We spent the following days selecting the members of the elite. Certain families should have to be included. Families that had in some way or other led large corporations for centuries. When the chaos had started, they had the necessary resources not to succumb. They had hired professional militias for their own defence. Most had left the conflict zones and were confined to estates where their survival was ensured. Not including these families would open a long war that would end wearing out the new order in its embryonic stage. These families would be willing to join the system as long as they belonged to the elite. They would provide expertise and management skills to the corps and they would only accept the disappearance of individual private property in favour of collective property of the corps if they belonged to the elite. Their properties would become part of the corps they would lead. Their families would join other families within the corp pillars. Each corp would be managed by nine families who would be part of the leadership, the elite. Each family would be a pillar of knowledge or expertise. For example, Tyo would have a main family specialized in the field of genetic enhancement and it would share the management of its corp with eight other families, defence, natural resources, energy, transportation, pharma&healthcare information systems, consumers goods and food.

Eighty-one families would form the elite. Nine families would rule the main nine pillars and would get support from seventy-two subfamilies. The main families could have a maximum of eight hundred thousand people around the world. The subfamilies only two hundred thousand. Each area of knowledge would have a leading family and eight subfamilies, a total of two million four hundred thousand members, both adult elite in management and their offspring still in training. The elite would add up to almost twenty million people, something less than 1.5% of the estimated corp population, once the establishment plan had been completed. The family's organization would be a matrix, of knowledge areas and corporate pillars. All families would watch over the pillar interests on which they were integrated and over the development of their area of expertise.

I was surprised at the ease with which the Army selected the families who would belong to the elite. It is true that anyone with minimum knowledge of the regular attendees at the Bilderberg forums would have come up with the same list we drafted in those meetings, but for a moment I thought the list had been prepared in advance.

It was time to design the establishment plan. The first phase would be to take over the communications systems and the distribution and management grids. Once completed, we would start re-establishing the energy in each of the matrix cells of the nine corps. Surrounding each of the main cells, the other production cells of the other eight corps. The establishment of productive cells would follow the agreed calendar, set according to the priority of access to the productive assets needed for the development of the general activity of each corp. We would have a year to close the establishment plan and get the necessary adherees. Our estimate was to end up the process with about fifteen hundred million corps adherees. During that year, we would have to conclude the conflict with the Islamic nation and establish a peaceful coexistence that would allow us to trade with them in a mid-term future. My idea was to integrate the whole Islamic nation in the world corp. But it was still a sensitive issue.

The commander felt compelled to share with me the open war situation. Initial discussions had been held with the aim of establishing a period of truce. The war continued but both sides had agreed to cease the use of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The number of casualties on both sides had reached disproportionate numbers. There were areas of the planet with such high pollution levels that they had to be taken into account within the establishment plan, so as to avoid them. No production cell could be set near to those areas.

After a month and a half, the new world order had been defined. The establishment plan was closed as well as the deadlines and priorities. The former US Government, now the Peace Army of the world, had approved the new world order. The corporations that had been contacted by us along the

way, such as Crynf, had also accepted it. The elite families had been contacted. They had applauded the plan and had received their genetic enhancements to become the first homo corps. Each family chose its own representative on the Board of the nine pillars. I was elected to represent the pillar of leisure, the family of the genetic modifications.

For the first time, all representatives were transferred to an Army haven, located in the Rocky Mountains.

Today, October 26th, the Board of the nine pillars, the one that I once called the World Management Board, has been constituted. In the first session, unanimously, I was elected chairman of the corp world.

I did it. I am the first chairman of the New World, the new order. An order designed to avoid inefficiencies.

I will demonstrate it is a good system.

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

And fight in the cause of God against those who fight against you; but transgress not by attacking them first for God loveth not the transgressors. And kill them wherever ye find them, and turn them out of that whereof they have dispossessed you; for temptation to idolatry is more grievous than slaughter; and do not fight them at al-Masjid al-Haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.

And if they cease, then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

[Qur'an, 2, 190-192]

During the days that followed my conversation with the sheikh, I meditated for a long time over the prophecy he had related. I pondered over the war he mentioned. The origin of the conflict. The current world situation. My being a free woman, yet hostage by the immensity of the desert around me. The inner peace I could feel with the Beja. The communion with the environment I had experienced within. I could leave whenever I pleased. I was free but, did I really want that? I had lost everything. My children had died in Zanzibar. My parents had also died some time ago. I had no siblings. I had had no contact with Pierre for years. My world as I had known it had crumbled down. Nothing connected me to my previous life. There was nothing in Zanzibar for me to go back to. Only pain, chaos and suffering. I did not even want to think of the island. There was nothing in Paris either. I did not know what situation France was in. What its role would be within the world war the sheikh had told me about. And I did not really care. Regardless

of its role, I had no bonds with France, except the mere chance of having been born there. If the world was at war, the desert was not a bad place to live. It would not be the target of a massive attack. This land had nothing for which to fight, besides the Beja's own survival. There were no oil reserves. It was not a border. It was not very populated. It did not have any valuable natural resources. Nubia's desert would not be a war target. The Beja had accepted me. I was one of them, part of the *bedana*²³. They respected and honoured me. I was the blue woman, *Azrak emra'a*. The light that protected the Beja people. Who had now become my people. I would not leave. Fate had been cruel. I had suffered more than I ever imagined possible, but the fairy godfather had guided my steps. I had found my place in the world. I told Bushra. A few hours later she came to get me. The sheikh wanted to speak to me again. And again, Bushra acted as our interpreter.

The sheikh had unfolded an old world map tooled on leather over the rugs where we sat down. His left hand covered the northwestern part of Africa. That was Al-Maghrib, where the sun goes down. The area that Westerners know as Libya was the bridge with Al-Mashriq, where the sun is born. His left hand run over the map, from Libya to the Persian Gulf.

The Umayyad, an Arab dynasty, spread the Islam throughout those lands during the 7th Century D.C. They created the largest empire known until that date. The Arab empire. From the Pyrenees to India. Almost five thousand miles. Back then, the heirs of the Roman Empire were in the midst of turmoil, obscurantism. The centre of human worries in Christian territory was God, the only Truth. The Christian Church's totalitarian beliefs made man and progress kneel down before God. Scientific truth was not necessary. The Divine truth was enough. However, in other lands where Christianity had not arrived, Arab tribes embraced a new religion. Islam allowed the unification and creation of an identity sign among tribes that had had no connection until then. It gave them the necessary unity to grow and expand. To go beyond their deserted territories. To conquer new lands and export their thriving civilization. Centuries of relentless trade had enabled the Arabs to adopt wit and wisdoms from very different cultures. From China they brought paper, gunpowder and the compass. Paper, one of the best-kept secrets by the Chinese Han dynasty. They snatched it at the Battle of Talas. The Arabs captured some prisoners who revealed the secret for making paper. That empowered them to build the first paper factories in Samarkand and Bagdad. It helped the development of written books, as opposed to the manuscripts on papyrus or tanned leather, manuscripts were now written on paper.

From India they brought the Arabic numbers that allowed them to set the base for modern algebra. From the Ancient Byzantine Empire they assimilated the Greek knowledge on topics such as philosophy, geography and medicine. From Egypt and Mesopotamia, they learned the art of

artificial irrigation: canals, irrigation ditches, waterwheels, fountains...and a whole array of hydraulic construction techniques. Also the alchemy of tinting and acids. From Persia they brought the game of chess and the cheapest source of energy in the world, the windmill and the mill moved by the energy from tides and rivers.

The Umayyad dynasty was succeeded by the Abasi. The abassies valued knowledge above everything else. They moved the Empire's capital from Damascus to Baghdad. There they founded the 'house of knowledge' that rivalled in wisdom with the others that were also being founded around that time in Al-Qâhira²⁴ and Qurtuba²⁵. They turned the Muslim world into the intellectual world centre. The Arab Empire reached its prime, its golden age. For more than seven centuries, seven hundred years, engineers, philosophers, poets, tradesmen, doctors, artisans, academics from the Islamic world, helped to develop science and knowledge. The wisdom absorbed from other cultures and other civilizations became wider, deeper. They contributed with new inventions and innovations. They gathered the knowledge from all the corners of the world and translated it into Arabic in its booming paper manuscript industry. They created the first hospitals and public libraries, the first universities. They built astronomy observatories which functioned as great research centres.

It was a prosperous era. The so-called '*Islamic-pax*'. Global trade and the advance of agricultural technologies enabled the adaptation of remote crops to non-indigenous areas. Citric fruits arrived to the Mediterranean region from China. Rice, cotton and sugar cane from India. Berbers managed to establish the first sugar refineries and expand its consumption across their entire Empire. Rotation farming, irrigation techniques and the study of crops adapted to the season and soil contributed to an agricultural bonanza that favoured the growth of the population, the development of a thriving economy that fostered the birth of several industries.

However, as with all Empires, the Islamic Empire became ungovernable. Its domains were too extensive. Within the Empire's borders the seed of the Caliphate's independence germinated. In the Tenth Century the crusades started to debilitate the Empire, although the greatest threat would come from beyond its eastern border. The Mongols invaded Baghdad in the Eight Century. The Ottomans submitted Constantinople in the Fifteenth Century. The Empire desistengrated. Europeans started establishing colonies in the former land of the Empire. It was time for the Western Renaissance. They broke out of obscurantism. They bet on innovation, on development. It was the right time for them to also invest in knowledge. The Arab world stopped doing it. The West modernized. They became superior in knowledge and slowly but surely started invading them. Westerners plundered Ifriqiya²⁶. They turned its people into slaves. They established protectorates. The ruled with double standards. On the one hand, the laws that ruled the white

people, on the other the laws that applied to the rest: to them, the real land owners. They divided the world as if it was a pie. They distributed the richness of the soil without taking into account the people that had lived there since the beginning of times. Each European country got a piece. They thought they were superior. They underestimated their traditions, their customs, and their religion.

They had everything they wanted and more. Years later, the great wars broke out in Europe. White men against white men. They fought to get more. The white man's greed had always been unlimited. It was the beginning of the end of the West's Empire. The colonies used the struggle among white men to claim their independence. The era of colonies came to an end. Indeed. But it ended how and when the Westerners decided. When the Second Great War was over, the victors drew new borders, established new governments, imposed neo-colonialism; invasion and domination, hidden behind transnational corporations that responded to the financial interests of the undefeated. The spoliation continued. The new owners started wars, with the aim of taking over yet another natural resource. Wars in which only the local population died, not the white man, not the Westerners. Neo-colonial wars increased at the same pace as the fossil resources diminished. The ancient Arab empire was rich in oil. The Arab countries tried to form a coalition through different organizations, the OPEP, the Arab league... By uniting they thought they would regain the strength the Empire once had, but in reality this never happened. Their land had black gold, the most sought asset, the energy of development, the engine behind the decadent Western Empire. The liquid wars to get the oil, gas, water reserves, got more sophisticated, more technical, they became remote control wars. Wars designed and controlled on a computer.

Seven months ago, the Arab league's counter-espionage discovered that the United States had designed a virus they had called vȳpadek. It had been designed to leave the Middle East and the Maghreb without power. This threat united the Arab world once again. What the different alliances and organizations had not managed to achieve, what the most radical Islamism had not attained with the terrorism they had name jihad was finally achieved when the whole Arab world realized it would be attacked by the West. They wanted to eliminate them. Erase them from the face of the Earth. They didn't want to keep faking they were a free nation. They did not want to continue the pantomime of deposing and restoring new regimes managed from a distance according to their own interests. They wanted to put an end to the Arab world.

The threat united all the Arab people. All the Islamic people, the Umma²⁷. From Cashmere to Rabat, the tribes united once again. They designed a counter-virus, karişiklik , which was implanted in the west. Both viruses were programmed on a countdown sequence. The Islamic nation, as they

self-proclaimed, took advantage of the surprise factor. They knew that on the 12th of July, the world would be left without power. Sunk in a blackout. They planned the attack on Europe through the fifth column that for years had entered those countries in the form of immigration. European countries were rich as a result of the plundering of the Islamic nation. The Umma had the right to enjoy the treasures they robbed them centuries ago. Europe would be for the Muslim world. The former territories of dâr al-Islâm²⁸, like Al-Andalus or Siquilia²⁹, would be recovered and part of dâr al-Harb³⁰ would be conquered.

On the 12th of July war broke out in Europe and the Islamic territory. The mission: to kill the West! The fifth Islamic column, already established in Europe, made it unnecessary to deploy a large number of troops. Europe, attacked by karişiklik, immersed in the chaos derived from the blackout, fell before the Trojan horse they themselves had helped to create. Millions died in the war: in Europe, Africa, Asia. Millions were still dying now. karişiklik and výpadek has caused much more chaos than anybody had been able to anticipate. It seemed as though the creators of the software virus were unable to come up with an antivirus. Karişikli and výpadek had developed a life of their own. They spread through the grids worldwide. They put down roots in them. Almost three months later the world was still without power. The Islamic nation now dominated most of Europe, the initial objective. But it did not put an end to the war. The most radical branch of the new Islamic Government, gloating with their recently acquired power, euphoric with the arms they had at their disposal following Europe's invasion, had convinced the whole Assembly to continue the war. To attack the United States of America. Where the threat had been born. To attack the creators of výpadek.

The attack on the States had started the previous month. They had used Western and their own arms. Nuclear, bacteriological arms. Millions were still dying now. The Islamic nation's Assembly had fallen on the Western trap. Nothing was enough. Guided by greed, revenge and irrational thinking, they were destroying the world. Wiping out the population.

The Beja people did not want to be a part of this cause. The bedana leaders had met shortly after the virus became active. They wanted to unify their stance. To share information received directly from the Islamic Nation's Assembly. The sheikh went to Rabak as representative of our bedana. The Beja would not back the war beyond the conquering of the former territories. Death only brings more death with it. It would come back as different types of evil. The jinns would be unleashed. Finding me in Rabak was the ascertainment of the prophecy.

The Beja would stay out. They lived in an inhospitable region. Not many would venture into their land. They would keep following their laws, based on their tradition, not on the Shari'a³¹. I would be safe there.

Bushra had already conveyed my intention of remaining by their side. The Beja people welcomed me. They would defend my life with their blood. They would share their water and salt with me.

From that day onwards, I belonged to the Beja tribe.

* * *

Totnes, UK

"Totnes has an opportunity here to set a ground breaking example internationally. Rob and I have been talking about this idea of The Great Turning, maybe in 400 years time, if humanity finds a way, maybe they will look back at this time, namely the beginning of the 21st century, as a crucial time, as the last decades of the Oil Age. Maybe they will tell stories about what happened in Totnes. Maybe this evening will be something that is the beginning of one of those stories. If you look ahead at the future, there are gloomy possibilities, but there are also inspiring possibilities, and you are part of an inspiring possibility by being here tonight".

*The Great Adventure of Energy Descent – Chris Johnstone at the
Transition Town Totnes launch*

The day after landing in England we got back on track. We started the path to find our community. A community on which we needed to pin our hopes but that we didn't even know if it really existed. The captain didn't tell us where we had landed. He had brought us safely to England. The rest was up to us. He didn't care nor wanted to know anything else about our lives. What a bastard! How many more would he have thrown into the sea?

With the first road signs we knew we were in the county of Devon. Maria told me that in her college days she had looked at some case studies of sustainability in this county. The one she remembered over the rest was that of Totnes. It could be our lifeline. Totnes was among the first transition towns. According to the theory of this movement, at least a decade is needed to turn a town into a resilient city. They have had more time. It could be our chance. Just what we were looking for. She was so excited. I didn't

understand a fucking word of what she was telling me. What was a resilient city? A decade for what? Our salvation, why?

She calmed down and began by explaining what the fuck she meant by this thing called resilience. It had different meanings depending on whether it was applied to ecology, a community, a habitat, a population, a region ... What interested us was the resilience of a community, namely Totnes. Resilience was the capacity to prevent collapse at the first signs of lack of oil, energy or food.

Strike. We were missing the three.

Resilience was the ability of a community to adapt to a changing environment with limited resources.

Another strike. There was nothing.

Totnes had devised a plan of action to reduce its energy dependence, to locate their food, to reduce their ecological footprint and to develop values of cooperation within the community.

Yes, we were interested.

Maria didn't know how the energy decreasing plan had evolved. Totnes had designed it in 2009. She studied her MA in 2015. By then, the town had built public transport powered by the methane that the community produced with their organic rubbish. They had achieved a level of energy self-sufficiency of 50%, mainly due to mills and hydraulic works. The local farming cooperatives supplied 60% of the food needs of the community. They had internalized the model of shared houses, co-housing to facilitate access to a decent home to every member of the community, to foster relationships. They had developed a contingency plan if the scenario of energy shortage was to worsen even more. They had their own teams of intervention to protect the community in an extreme situation, in which the army wouldn't be able to. In addition, they had designed rationing schemes and management plans for agriculture and the production of energy in difficult situations. Bearing in mind this was 2015, it was pretty good. And they probably thought of much more over the last years!

It was the perfect town. The community we were looking for. I don't know what kind of weirdo could have thought of this in 2009, but the plan fit us like a glove. It's true that in 2009 the world situation was fucked up. The great global financial crisis had just started, oil prices had hit their first ceiling of USD150 a barrel a few months before. The Middle East was full of peace missions, as the UN guys liked to call the war. There was loads of political instability. But if I compare it to what came later, the situation wasn't that serious. Those who designed the plan were visionaries. They got

it right. In the following years it all got worse. The struggle over the control of oil fields flared up. The fucking peace missions multiplied. The so called liquid wars. Wars to hold control over the black gold, gas and the water or the aquifers. Africa and South America had continued power outages. The first world couldn't afford blackouts. Renewables weren't enough, even at their full capacity. They bet on nuclear energy. Nuclear power plants bloomed like mushrooms. Fukushima's accident, after the 2011 tsunami in Japan, was repeated with more devastating effects years later in Europe and the United States. The financial crisis intensified. It plunged the world into a well. Too many years making money from nothing eventually swept away all monetary systems. The UN promoted the birth of the SOG, the new legal currency for the whole world. Many financial institutions disappeared. Along with their customers' deposits. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed. Hundreds of millions of people lost their jobs. Many in the first world became poor, truly poor. Those who were already poor before, swelled the ranks of the millions who died of hunger or lack of access to drinking water. The resources were very scarce for some, others, the lucky ones, still hooked to the wheel of consumption and welfare, but we knew it was at the expense of millions of people with barely enough to survive. Social injustice became unsustainable. Military tensions grew. Those of us who lived well closed our eyes and pretended not to notice. We didn't want anything to change. But it did. If any of us had taken the time to stop and think we would have seen it. The blackout was the chronicle of a death foretold. The system was unsustainable. One way or another it had to die. Rather than doing it in an orderly manner, as we might have done it with a model similar to that one in Totnes, we let the problem grow until it burst. Which is what, after two and half months and I don't know how many millions of deaths, had brought Maria and me to the English coast.

We set off to Totnes. None of us knew what we would find upon our arrival. We didn't know if during the last years they had achieved a resilience level that would have enabled them to overcome the current situation. If they had succeeded, they would have been under attack from all the surrounding population. We expected that the intervention patrols formed years ago, had been diligent, that the contingency plan had been effective. We needed it.

Totnes proved to be quite close to the coast where we landed. It was strange for us to walk in broad daylight. We kept many of the precautions that we had in the occupied zone. On our way northward we avoided any populated area. The clans could be as dangerous as Islamic patrols. Fortunately we didn't see anyone along the way. Twenty miles of English countryside and six hours later we had reached our destination. The sunset had not yet begun.

The city was fortified. They had established a perimeter with all types of appliances that surrounded the city. It was a wall of trash; cars, trucks,

buses, lockers, statues ... everything they had been able to find inside their makeshift wall. Every sixty feet they had built a watchtower. Almost all the dwellings of the towers were cars. They kept their batteries alive. They used the headlights as perimeter lighting bulbs. It was clear that they had been attacked. We sought out the most open area to approach the town. We didn't want them to see us as a threat or that they may think we were part of an ambush. When we were about a hundred feet from the wall, a metallic voice, enhanced by a megaphone, asked us what we wanted. We got closer. The silence allowed them to listen to us. My English was better than Maria's. This time it was me who spoke. We told them we were Europeans who had managed to flee from the occupied zone. We needed a shelter. We asked permission to enter the town. We asked for asylum. I told them the hardships which we have gone through. We were not French. We came from Madrid. We had walked over nine hundred miles. We had managed to cross the English Channel. We had reached the doors of Totnes. They couldn't leave us out. We would help. Maria was an energy expert, her knowledge would add value to the community. I was a tireless worker, I would work in the fields, in the methane plant, in surveillance. We would do whatever was necessary.

The town couldn't accommodate more people. Many had come seeking refuge in Totnes. They had suffered multiple attacks from nearby towns. Their situation was also difficult. If they admitted more people in their community, they would put its survival at risk.

We wouldn't leave. We would camp on their doorstep. They had to talk to their assembly. They could make an exception with us. They wouldn't regret it.

Their orders were clear. The town was closed to outsiders. The watchman didn't go to get anyone else. We didn't represent a threat there, on the verge of their wall. He didn't even aim at us with the rifle slung on his back.

We had nowhere to go. We camped on their doorstep. The days, and nights passed. It was getting cold, especially at night. We appreciated the warm clothes we had grabbed on the farm in France. Many days it rained. We made small raids around the camp, looking for food and some firewood. There wasn't too much food. Some half rotten blackberries that would not last much longer, some dandelions from which we ate the leaves, acorns, nuts that were still bitter and some field mice we caught occasionally when hunting.

During eleven nights we were at the doors of Totnes. In the twelfth, a bloody storm broke. The water curtain wouldn't let us see beyond three feet. The thunder boomed in our ears like guns. It was cold. We had no shelter. We couldn't stay there any longer. The peaceful site of Totnes had not

worked. They didn't give a damn about us. They didn't care about our luck. We had to leave. Find another place. Standing there, under the walnut trees, I hugged Maria to share the little heat that remained in our bodies. We were wet, hungry and exhausted after more than three months fighting to survive.

Above the thunder we heard a clunk. It was the megaphone. They were calling us. They had lit two of the watchtowers. They were indicating our way in. Lady Luck was finally on our side. There was still some humanity in the world. They had taken pity on us. At last.

We climbed a ladder that they pulled from one of the watchtowers. We could barely climb. The water made our hands and our feet slip at every step. First came Maria. When she entered the surveillance car I went up.

The distrust in the air was evident. This time they were holding their rifles. They said they would take us to the assembly. We were escorted all the way. There wasn't a soul on the streets. Some faint twinkling lights indoors, sheltered from the rain.

We entered a small house on one level. There was a couple waiting for us there. Their faces were covered by masks. Was there a health epidemic in Totnes? It was late to retreat. I started to tell them our story. Trying to flatter them. To talk them into us. They asked me to shut up. The town was closed to outsiders since the end of July. Many had sought asylum. Some had made threats, others had tried to sneak in, many had used force, thousands had wept, begged, but none had been as stubborn for so many days. They didn't know where we came from. Neither if we were carriers of any disease. The community have voted. They had accepted our entry, but we should remain confined at first. In two days there would be a full moon. On the last quarter of the waning moon, if they hadn't noticed anything strange, they would set us free and give us accommodation. Meanwhile we would receive our food through the window. We would have no contact with anyone. In the house we would find everything we may need. They didn't know us. They couldn't welcome us. They just hoped they hadn't made a mistake letting us in. Nowadays errors were paid very at a very expensive price.

We were confined under their seven locks. All the windows were barred. The door was locked and bolted from the outside.

We had voluntarily entered prison.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

"If we were to create a new world, a new civilization, a new art, uncontaminated by tradition, fear, ambition, if we were to rise together a new society in which there is no 'you' and 'I' but only 'we', wouldn't there should be a completely anonymous mind and that therefore, it should be alone in its own creativity? This implies, doesn't it? that there has to be a rebellion against conformity, against respectability, because the respectable man is mediocre, because he always desires something".

J. Krishnamurti, Talks in India 1953 (Verbatim Report) Poona & Bombay

We have been here eighty-three days. Almost twelve weeks. Vancouver's so far in my memory. Actually it seems as if I have classified the events in different time scales. It feels like we have been without energy for years. However, I remember my sister's death as if it happened yesterday. It hurts me so much to remember her. I don't get used to the idea of not having her any longer, of knowing I will never see her again. I would like to talk to her about so many things, to ask her opinion, to know what she'd do in different situations we're experiencing. She was more down to earth than anyone in our family. She was my fortress, even my parents' when they were still alive.

They snatched her away from me and now I'm alone. I have never been keen on expressing my feelings, depending on others. I had my sister. She was my shoulder to cry on, she was always there, even when we were apart, when thousands of kilometres separated us. She was the person I could trust blindly. Now that she's not here, I miss all the things that she meant to me. I have a whole that needs to be filled. I feel vulnerable. I need to love and feel

loved and protected. Maybe the rest of the group is going through something similar. All of us have lost loved ones since the blackout. Perhaps it's the reason why harmony reigns, why we work and live peacefully together. Our small neo-tribe has come alive in its very own way. It exists because we all needed it to exist. It works because we didn't have any other choice. Each one of us fills a memory, a place that others left when they disappeared. Each has a function that the rest appreciates and respects. Pain has made us erase bitterness, envy, comparisons. None of us is better than the others. No one owns more than the rest. We know we need each other. We know we have to rely on each other, that we must give protection to the group to guarantee our neo-tribe's survival, to avoid any threat.

We have gotten used to our new environment, to our new way of life. At first we were full of fear. The fear of others finding the farm made us set guards, be alert throughout the day. We didn't dare enjoy what we had. We feared losing it. One of the many inertias of our past lives. But little by little, I don't know if it was the wind, the sun, the sound of water or the rustle of the leaves..., our fears started to vanish. We shortened the guards until we only left the dogs on duty. They would bark and alert if a stranger got close. We didn't have an easy access. If no one had arrived to the farm in nearly three months, there wasn't any reason to think they'd be arriving in the near future.

We enjoyed every minute of our lives. We spent some hours of the day doing the tasks that ensured our survival. Perhaps three hours. The rest was spare time, time for ourselves. To explore, walk, sing, chat, teach the children, think, make things with our hands. David proved to be the most skilful. Paul had been very strict with him. Eight weeks of bed rest. At first he hit the roof. He couldn't stand lying down or sitting without doing anything. The days were endless for him. There wasn't much paper around the Earthship to write or paint. Nor were there many books to read. Only a mushroom guide, another of medicinal plants and the two John Seymour bibles of self-sufficient life, written in the seventies and despite the years, completely up-to-date. They had become our bedside-table books.

We would always be outdoors and even though we took turns to keep him company in the house, he kept saying he needed something to do, whatever, but he needed to feel useful, to fill the hours. He tried to sew. Mostly because there was a complete sewing kit, but among the many skills that we later discovered we had, sewing wasn't one of them. After trying many things, he finally found two activities that were made just for him. One was carpentry and the other basketry. With a piece of wood, he was able to do almost anything. Ciarán and Dylan got him good pieces of solid wood. Some chisels, a few tips, sandpaper of different textures (all tools in the shed) and he modelled the wood as if it were clay. He made spoons, bowls, stools, figures, children's toys, boxes or whatever we would ask him for.

A couple of weeks ago, Paul discharged him. He removed his plaster and allowed him to start walking. He had a slight limp but much slighter than Paul had feared. Nothing that would prevent him from moving freely. He still can't walk long distances but he's constant and has an iron will. He exercises the leg every day for over an hour. The rest of the day he works. We've told him to take it easy, that there isn't any hurry, but he says he needs to catch up. He feels as if he has been a burden for all these weeks and he wants to learn the ropes. He's already begun with two outdoor projects, the silo, that we hadn't even started to think about and a tree house for the children. Meanwhile he still makes any tool we may need. With the reed he's reached a master level. He can make a basket or a mat in less than an hour. Fascinating.

Another thing that fascinates me and pleasantly surprises me is that our neo-tribe hasn't felt the need to erect a leader. I've never been drawn by anthropology but instinctively, I had always thought that when a group of people gathered and worked together on a project, of whatever sort, they chose in a conscious and agreed way a leader or that the leader was born on his or her own, out of the group, spontaneously. I had always associated the idea of a group of people with that of leadership. Someone who sets the direction, that would guide the group, who had more knowledge or more power or more..., whatever. Another inertia of our past life. It strikes me as curious that we don't have one, that we haven't got the need for a leader, that we haven't followed the behavioural patterns that the system had inculcated us from our childhood, the patterns under which we've grown. The chaos has changed something in our code. It has changed some lines of the software they used to mould us. We've avoided the figure of the leader, we've ignored the pathetic need to become a flock, to be guided by one that thought or that we thought was better than the rest. Naturally, we are taking strides to regain the freedom that for centuries the system has robbed mankind.

What more lines of our code would have been altered? What changes are occurring elsewhere in the world?, In which other communities? Change is the only path for hope. Although it's also an open door to uncertainty and distrust. If only I had a crystal ball to know which ones will prevail...

* * *

Saturday, November 8th

Tokyo, Japan

Hyakujo, the Chinese Zen master, used to labour with his pupils even at the age of eighty, trimming the gardens, cleaning the grounds, and pruning the trees.

The pupils felt sorry to see the old teacher working so hard, but they knew he would not listen to their advice to stop, so they hid away his tools.

That day the master did not eat. The next day he did not eat, nor the next. "He may be angry because we have hidden his tools," the pupils surmised. "We had better put them back".

The day they did, the teacher worked and ate the same as before. In the evening he instructed them: "No work, no food".

After the first Board meeting of the nine pillars, family representatives were returned to our matrix cells. The establishment plan began. The first phase of taking control of the grid and the communication networks was a success. Power was restored in the areas of influence of each matrix cells and in some of the selected production cells. Those key in food production, energy generation and the correct deployment of the establishment plan.

Our implant factory started to function as soon as we took control of the networks. We had a stock of about ten million units. They were not enough to cover the establishment plan, not even to cover the identification of all family members. Production began immediately. Meanwhile, the rest of the world was still dark, immersed in chaos, conflict and death. It was essential that people received the new corp order as their saviour. Their joining would be easy only if they perceived a substantial improvement compared to their

current situation. We would be the saviours. The way back home, to normalcy, stability and security.

The establishment plan entered the stage of activation of the other matrix cells. Those who had survived at the headquarters of their former companies joined smoothly. Signing the new rules of the nine pillars. The implants were not yet available but they agreed to receive the genetic enhancements, knowing that once incorporated into their bodies, their exit from the corps world, voluntary or involuntary, could mean their death.

The family members were responsible for the adherence conferences. We organized briefings in each of the matrix cells. Trucks went back to circulation in the streets of the major towns. With a PA system, the families announced the set date for the briefings, the return of energy, and the opportunity to start a new life, the existence of a new world order that would guarantee the safety and welfare of those who were willing to adhere to it.

In each of the cities that housed the matrix cells, in each of the daily conferences, the auditorium would fill up. All survivors gathered round. Some urban tribes tried to boycott the conferences. The Peace Army carried out its mission perfectly. An organized force, with weaponry far superior to any of the urban tribes, was the ultimate deterrent. The gangs were dismembered, 99% of the population attended the conferences. Without commitments, without obligations. Just to listen to what the first worldwide organization to be born after the blackout was offering.

The families explained the reality of the world. The chaos, the war and the death of almost two thirds of the worldwide population. The creation of the Islamic nation, the difficulty of surviving without the support of an entity that would provide them with security, healthcare, basic services, access to food. At the conferences we explained the reasons for the creation of the nine pillars, the benefits, the improvements over the old organizations, the targets that guided us: to achieve a more balanced and more efficient society. Belonging to the system was simple. There were only nine rules for the adherees. For each of the adheree's rules, the corporations took on a commitment. Nine rules, nine commitments. Whoever agreed with them would only have to sign.

From day one, corporations pledged to meet their obligations. It was easy. The corps did not require much in return, only nine rules, the nine rules of the new pillars:

1. To accept the genetic improvement implants in their person and their descendants.
2. To respect and protect with their own life, the life of each and every one of the corps family members.

3. Not to have any property. Their previous properties would belong to the corp to which they adhered.
4. To comply with the health policies of the nine pillars.
5. To relinquish custody and education of their offspring to the corp to which they adhered.
6. To work the hours stipulated by their corp, in the assigned activity and comply with the privileges and ranks derived from it, as defined by the policy of the corps.
7. Not to maintain contact with unmodified humans that did not belong to one of the nine pillars.
8. Not to leave the corp to which they adhered.
9. To accept that the breach of any of the nine rules or the policies established by the nine pillars would mean the expulsion from the corp.

Nine simple rules.

In return, the nine corp commitments. Corporations were committed :

1. To support the adheree, who would have no lack of food, water, shelter or power.
2. To update genetic modifications implanted to the adherees so they could have access to all the corp services, according to their rank and privilege.
3. To provide adherees with education for their offspring so they could become productive adherees with access to a work which ensured their stay in the corp.
4. To provide health care to the adherees.
5. To ensure the integrity and security of all its adherees.
6. To support the adherees when their productive life cycle came to an end.
7. To keep electrical, transport and communication networks up to date, to ensure basic services to the adherees.
8. To offer five leisure hours daily for the entertainment of the adherees.
9. To ensure seventy hours of rest per week, in addition to the thirty-five hours per week of leisure.

The attendance was massive. So were the adhesions. Very few of those attending the conferences decided to remain outside a system that was offering the return to normality, stability and welfare.

The cell in Tokyo was the first one to be operational, the other eight matrix cells began to operate in less than a week. Taking control and ownership of productive assets, one of the keys for corporate development, was being implemented in stages without major clashes.

The main productive cells were launched. Wherever the nine pillars reached, order was restored. The world got gradually reconnected. The riots stopped. Production was restored. Genetic enhancements modules were mass-produced and implanted at a more than satisfactory pace.

At this point, over three hundred million people are part of the nine pillars. The phases of the establishment plan are going according to schedule. During this month we will initiate the establishment of productive units in South America and the southern half of Africa, where the Islamic nation has no control. North America, Asia, Australasia and the parts of Europe that remain free already have their first cells.

My plan works. The Board of the nine pillars respects me. Humanity worships me. I am The Saviour. I have the power to restore order and define the paths of humankind. I have entered the Olympus. I have created the new council of the Gods. Glory awaits me.

* * *

Nubia's Desert, Sudan

*We are the clouds 'children.
Wherever clouds go, so will we.
We are the wind's children.
It's direction marks our way.
We are the desert's children.
We travel with the dunes, water and salt.
We are the Earth's children.
Our beginning and our end.*

Anonymous. Internet

I was part of the Beja. Each day that went by I felt closer to the vast desert, to these austere and hospitable people. Bushra became my interpreter, my guide, my support. She was always there when I needed her. She taught me their traditions, their laws, their cooking methods, the way in which they interacted. With her help my tent ended up being just the same as any other in the camp. She insisted my cover should be blue in colour. I was Azrak emra'a, the blue woman. My tent had to proudly and clearly convey that I was the talisman. Bushra also insisted that she had to start embroidering my te-saqwit. I did not understand. She said it was my wedding gift. I was not going to get married. I hardly spoke to any of the tribe's men, save the sheikh. He had also become my guide. He was a wise man. Almost every night, when the songs started around the fires, Bushra

and I would go to his tent. The Beja's history was not written on paper. It was passed on generation after generation through stories and legends the tribe's sheikh had learned from the previous sheikh and who, in turn, would pass it on to his successor and the younger members of the tribe. They all knew most of the tribe's history, only a few legends were reserved for the sheikhs. Some of them had been transcribed onto camel's tanned leathers. They were real works of art, with Arabic characters carved on the leather, and coupled with illustrations coloured with different tints. The sheikh was in charge of guarding the manuscripts but any member of the tribe could access them. Everyone knew how to read. It was something that surprised me pleasantly.

Older women, the circle of knowledge, were those who were in charge of the education of the younger as part of their daily routine, they have set a time for schooling. They taught them to speak, read and write in Arabic, as well as the basic math. They asked me to participate in the classes. I could introduce the kids to my language, French. You can never learn too much. Maybe they will not need it in the desert, or maybe they will. I had plenty of time. So I accepted. It was my entrance, through the back door, to the circle of knowledge. Women began to count me in at their meetings. In one of those meetings they asked me how my wounds had healed, if I had recovered, fully, if my moons had returned to their regular cycle.

They had not. It was an issue that I had not even talked with Bushra. I didn't know whether it was due to everything I had been through or if it was just a question of my age. The end of a cycle. The entry into maturity.

They have all left behind their cycle stage, their stage of the moon. It represented the moment when a Beja woman would join the circle of knowledge. Like the sheikh represented wisdom and the history of his people, the circle of knowledge kept and transmitted the Beja customs, the laws to survive in the desert. All Beja ought to know them so as to not endanger the family, the tribe.

I was told my moment had come. In the next full moon, they would celebrate my entrance ritual into the circle of knowledge. They would prepare the tent of the smoke baths, with charcoal and luban. Luban meant milk in Arabic. It was one of the first words I learned with the Beja. I asked about the ritual, what they did with the milk. They all laughed. They showed me some resin stones with irregular shapes. That was what they would burn to purify my body and prepare it for the entry into a new stage, the linear stage of my life, a stage without cycles where I would live my time differently than I had lived until now.

The famous milk was incense. They called it milk because of the texture and colour of the resin when the it is exuded from the trees.

I reminisced with them that first day, shortly after I had recovered from my infection, when they gave me some camel milk, freshly milked, to try it. It

had plenty of foam and a hint of sweetness. I also wanted to try to milk a camel. I used sign language to make myself understood. There was a huge row. Women moved their arms, men got angry and went looking for the sheikh. It was taboo. Women were not allowed to milk the cattle. It was men's work. They were the ones to get milk and make a fair distribution among the families of the tribe. Never a woman, even if that woman was the Azrak emra'a. I apologized. An error due to my ignorance. Now I knew it. I would not try to milk the livestock.

However, processing the milk was a woman's work. With the camel and the goat's milk they prepared different types of cheese. Sometimes they prepared soft cheese but would not last more than a couple of days, so normally the cheese they prepared was hard cheese.

The soft cheese was very easy to make. We heated the milk until it was lukewarm. We drew it away from the fire and we dissolved the rennet in it. We left the pots covered with a cloth inside one of the tents for a couple of hours, until it curdled. Usually we did it early in the morning, so that the sun would not have risen too much and it wasn't too hot. We cut the curd into pieces that once it had been salted, we placed it in clothes that we tied up and hung so the serum could drain. A couple of hours and the cheese, which was like cottage cheese, was ready.

The difficult part of this whole process was to get the rennet. The Beja got it from a thistle flower. They collected and dried it when the thistle flower was blue. Once dry, they kept the pistils in cloth bags that would preserve for at least one year. Some years they would not be able to collect the flower, especially when the droughts came. Those ten years they had to buy it in the markets, as well as their beloved coffee. Bushra was responsible for preparing the rennet, like any medical tee or poultice. She was kind of a quack. She used the crushed pistils dissolved in water, several times, over some days. When the water was clear and not bluish, the rennet was ready to use.

The hard cheese started with the same procedure but took much longer. Now we had several in the drying phase, but they wouldn't be ready until next month or month and a half. After draining the curd, we had cooked it in a '*baine marie*' during at least half an hour to squeeze the last whey and then we put it into several moulds that were left, pressed with stones, for a couple of days. From the moulds to brine drums for another two days to end at the stage where they were now. We have kept them in the darkest and coolest places of the tents.

I enjoyed making cheese, grinding the grain, going for water to nearby springs, teaching the kids, preparing the camp fire, singing, listening to the sheikh. I liked living with the Beja. We had been in the dry-season camp for about two months. I felt as if I had lived there for a lifetime. Zanzibar was so

far away that I hardly perceived it as my own memories. However I felt Julién and Salma in every grain of sand of the desert that surrounded me. I saw them in the stars, in the clouds, I smelled them in the wind. The wind and the clouds that would bring us to the next camp.

Bushra told me that in the next new moon, after my entrance ritual to the circle of knowledge we would pack up our camp. We would head north, to the camps next to the Nubian sandstone aquifer. The sheikh and another nine men of the tribe would travel further to the north, up to a place near the Aswan Dam. He would join the delegation as the representative of the knowledge circle. They asked me to join them as the Beja talisman. We would attend a meeting of the heads of the Al-Mašriq tribes. The war with the West was coming to an end. The Assembly of the Islamic nation was cutting agreements with their former enemies. The tribes met to ratify them..., or maybe reject them.

* * *

Totnes, UK

In a post-industrial society, the only chance of survival will be for those communities that have at least seven acres of forest per capita, in their immediate environment (less than a day's ride, which means a radio of five or six miles of mountain and thirteen miles in plain). Any other community will have enormous difficulties to survive in the long term and will end up running out of the renewable energy sources that are in its vicinity, if these are firewood and animal dung.

"The Jungle Book", Peter A. Prieto

When we left the confinement they took us to the assembly. All the members had attended. It consisted of fifteen people. They wanted news. Like everyone else. The radio allowed them to establish contact with some other communities, they had even talked at some point with the French Resistance. But we were coming from the occupied zone. We had crossed nearly one thousand miles of enemy territory.

From everything we were able to tell them, the thing that worried them the most was that the resistance in the north of France was demoralized. If the resistance fell, the hope died for those who had been trapped behind Muslim lines. At this point there shouldn't be many who still remained alive on the continent, but just as we had come from Madrid, there could be others coming from the south.

The captain's cruelty scared them but it didn't surprised them. The clans that had been created throughout the south of England followed similar tactics. Brutality was their first weapon, followed by the total absence of

scruples. The society before the blackout didn't have moral values. The last vestiges still remaining in some communities vanished as soon as the food and water shortages arrived.

For them it had also been very hard. Totnes has been working on achieving resilience for many years. Among their contemplated future scenarios they had thought about scarcity of energy and resources, but they had counted on having supplies even if they weren't as generous and continued as it had been during the last century. That would allow them not be a target among the surrounding population.

It's true that they had designed contingency plans. What they had would be a precious commodity if there was an unexpected event. They had energy independence. They were 80% self-sufficient in food. The community had established cooperation protocols guaranteeing the necessary assistance to the members going through difficult situations. But contingency plans didn't contemplate that the world would stop overnight and that everything would depend on what each one had stored or could produce without external power, without supplies of any kind. They hadn't contemplated that scenario.

During the first days the uncertainty about whether the government would be able to restore power, kept the hope among the population. As the days progressed, they all realized that the situation was not going to improve. The Government could not send encouraging messages to the population. It was not really able to get any messages through. Despair began to set in. Radio contacts with France painted a bloody war scenario. The news that Islamic forces had overrun continental Europe spread like wildfire. Summary trials began. Committees were established. Clans were created. Violence took over everything. The army could only manage to maintain some control in large cities. Far from their areas of influence they couldn't do anything. Many people from the rural areas undertook the exodus to the cities. They were looking for the security that the army would give them, for a solution coming from their Government. Those living in large cities tried to find food in rural areas. They fled from curfews, martial laws, the abusive and indiscriminate use of force from their army. There wasn't enough for everyone. Millions of people died during the first months, most at the hands of their neighbours, of their fellow Brits. People started arriving to Totnes pretty soon. One group after the other. They sought refuge, like us. But they couldn't feed so many mouths. The assembly voted to shut the entrance to the town. They had to build barricades. The wall. To establish surveillance shifts twenty four hours a day. Violent attacks soon became a reality. Totnes had weapons. The local police identified itself with the community project rather than with a government that was dying. They trained others to have a large enough armed force, a force that would be able to fight back those attacks that kept coming.

Many had died defending the town. In late July they were about ten thousand, now they weren't more than six thousand. The survival of the community was in danger. They depended on forests, crops and livestock that were out of the wall. Although they were less than those who began the journey, less than what their self-sufficiency plans had been designed for, the assembly knew that soon their resources would be used up. They didn't expect us to come up with a solution. They had allowed us to enter solely out of pity. They admired the effort we had made to get there. They appreciated that our request had been peaceful at all times. Time would tell about the fate of Totnes. Meanwhile, urgent needs were established on a day to day basis. We would be useful. All available hands were needed.

We were assigned a cohousing home with the Richard's family, one of the members of the assembly. When the meeting was finally over, it was him who took us to our new home. It was small, austere, strange.

I had no kitchen or dining room. Only one bedroom, a toilet and a small seating area. That was all. I thought it looked more like a bedroom of a poor rooming house than a real house, but at this stage of the video game I counted my blessing for having a roof over our heads.

Richard explained that we could use the common bathrooms once a week to have a shower. There were also common diners. All food was stored there. It was under custody. No one had free access to it. There were eating shifts organized around work shifts. Ours was the third shift. That meant that we would work from eight am until one. Mainly in the care of the common orchards, vegetable gardens and farms as well as in the preparation of canning the excess food. When we'd finished eating, we didn't have any specific job assigned but it was expected that we went to the common areas to see how we could help. Children needed activities that enabled them to forget what they were experiencing. There were elderly people who needed assistance, patients needed to be cared for. We could always be trained to increase the security service.

I don't know what we had expected, but it wasn't this. After listening to Maria talk, I thought we were going to paradise. A self-sufficient place where life would be easy. The crappy part should have been the previous step. Crossing their border. Entering into their community. But once inside, everything would be fucking great. It was not.

Richard showed us the veggie gardens, the farms, the dining rooms, the centre of methane generation, the schools, the makeshift hospitals... Everything seemed moribund, even the people. There wasn't a spark of joy, of life. I know they had suffered, they were still suffering, and they had the sword of Damocles over their heads. Like everyone, but dammit!, with such a level of depression all that they were going to get was to kick the bucket ahead of schedule. They had given up.

When we returned to our house, if you want to call it that, I talked with Maria. For her it was as pitiful as for me. This community would not survive. Not if they kept locked up. They have put themselves under siege. Until their 'self-siege' was not lifted, they wouldn't have a real chance of survival.

For the time we would remain there. At least there was some food. But we had to try to go to London. Things couldn't be as black as the assembly painted. It had been almost four months. Everything would have settled down. Not where we were, it was totally peripheral, but in London for sure. We had to try to get news from the outside. To convince them to send scouts to the other side of the wall. We would volunteer. We had guts. Anything, to find an alternative to the agonizing death that Totnes had chosen.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

Nature does not change, although the way of viewing nature invariably changes from era to era. No matter what the era, natural farming has always existed as the wellspring of agriculture.

"The one-straw revolution", Masanobu Fukuoka

The mild climate of the West coast of Canada allowed us to enjoy the fall. The woods were painted in hues of red and yellow. The mushrooms started sprouting in every corner of the forest. Following our collecting frenzy, mushrooms became a target. We could enjoy them during the fall and collect enough to dry them out and make preserves. The only problem was that there was no mycologist among us. The solution again came from the farm that fate had given us. The perfect present suited to guide us, along the path of self-sufficiency. We took the mushroom guide off the shelf and while we were at it, we also took the medicinal plants book.

The first thing that the guide warned about was the risk implied in collecting and consuming wild mushrooms. Learning which were edible could be a process that could last a lifetime. The introduction to mycology should be guided by the hand of an expert or a local club with knowledge of the local varieties, as they were different in each area. That scared us a bit but the forest was full of mushrooms. We didn't want to miss the opportunity to have more food in our pantries. We couldn't afford to ignore what Mother Earth was giving us.

After reading, re-reading, walking in the woods with the guide, comparing the mushrooms we saw with the photos of those we thought were a match, we decided not take any risk with those that could lead to the slightest confusion. We collected just four types: King boletus, cauliflower fungus, common chanterelle, corel mushroom. Corels and cauliflowers were the easiest to identify. I would never have thought that there were mushrooms with such unusual shapes. They really looked like cauliflowers and coral growing on the bark of trees. The porcini, the Italian name for the King boletus, was the nicest. It tasted like nuts. I guess the Italian name was given after its stem, fat as a pig's full tummy. We were more cautious with chanterelles. We've read there were also false chanterelles that, while not always poisonous, didn't always go down well. We collected some, but we didn't dry or store any chanterelle. If we were going to get intoxicated, it was best to do so at the time when the danger was still hovering over our heads. Within six months we would have completely forgotten that some of the chanterelles could be false. Of those we picked up, we did not have a problem with any. Nobody had even the slightest symptom of intoxication.

There were many more mushrooms. All shapes and colours. Many had medicinal properties. Many more than what we collected were edible, but ignorance is a bad ally. When you know nothing about a subject and you make the first contact, it's difficult to stop being amazed by everything surrounding it. How could I have spent my whole life with such a lack of interest over this? Without knowing anything about it, when it's of such importance? There was a whole world around mushrooms. That first year, we had discovered the tip of the iceberg. I don't know if in future years we would do any further progress. We had the feeling that it would be difficult without the proper tutelage of an expert.

During our walks in the woods looking for mushrooms, we also collected some plants from the medicinal plants guide. It wasn't for lack of medicines, Paul had brought enough for over a year and luckily, up until now, we hadn't needed any, but we'd found some curious uses for some plants and imbued with the spirit of self-sufficiency we wanted to test them. The one that caught our attention overall, was the root of the dandelion. The plant was good for almost everything, anaemia, indigestion, to prevent fluid retention, rheumatism and on top of all that, the best thing was that the root could be used to prepare a coffee substitute. It has been months since we've tasted coffee. We knew that in these latitudes, we wouldn't be able to grow it, even if we had seeds, which wasn't the case anyway, so we decided to collect roots and give it a try. There weren't as many dandelions as in spring, but as the weather was still mild we managed to find enough to gather a couple of pounds of roots. It was important to get the entire root, the thicker the better. We put them out to dry, hanging upside down in a sunny area, but the fall brought rain and they got wet. The second time round we moved them to

the house, we changed the drying process and left them hanging next to the fireplace, which at that time of the year, was lit every night.

Once they had dried, we cut the roots into small pieces, the size of coffee beans. We roasted them in a pan, without oil, without butter, without any kind of fat, only the beans, what a delight! They smelled like freshly roasted coffee. We used the flour mill to grind the roasted root pieces. It was impressive, the texture, the aroma, the flavour. It really was like coffee. It woke you up but didn't speed you up. We had been able to get coffee, something none of us would have imagined to be possible, isolated as we were, in the middle of nowhere. With the discovery that it was a good substitute for coffee, we combed the woods to find up to the last dandelion of the season and we wrote down the task, to collect new roots during the next spring. We also crushed the rest of the dry plant and stored it for tea. Any iron supplement would be more than welcome.

We managed to get adapted to our environment. Living in balance with it. Our house wasn't just the four walls where we slept. Our home was the forest, the lake, the creeks. Each one of those places was, in its own way, responsible of our well-being. They surrounded us with beauty, took care of us, provided everything we needed. Our souls got linked to the soul of the forest. Each of us could spend hours staring at a certain spot, a bird, moving water, the tops of trees swaying with the wind. It gave us life, energy, passion.

Modern man had been dehumanized. All, in varying degrees, had lost contact with Nature. By dint of not watching Her, not feeling Her, we had forgotten that we're part of Her. The emptiness we had all experienced in a city at one time or another is the gap left by the lack of contact with our natural environment, our real habitat. At some point in history they stole it from us. We began to think that human beings had no real connection with Mother Earth, that we didn't belong to Her. We arrived at the absurd idea that She belonged to us. We started to believe that our habitat was in the cities, the concrete, the prefabs, the dead material. Mother Earth became just one more housed cow to squeeze and put into service until no longer useful. At some point in history, we lost contact with reality. We thought we were gods and began to destroy what life had given us, everything that sustained us. We put a thousand walls between the plundering of Mother Earth and our micro-worlds. A thousand walls or however many might be required to deny what we were doing. We were killing ourselves slowly and painfully. Not only us, also the future generations that were to come, those that had not been yet born. We were stealing their lives, their environment, their world. And instead of receiving these messages, clear information about what was happening with our planet, our habitat, we only heard sentences that seemed to be taken out of an ad-campaign, 'Damaging the environment', 'clean energies', 'eco-cars'. Such faraway, distant and impersonal words, that we felt

didn't have anything to do with us. I recycle, I use the bike to commute into the city, I have energy saving light bulbs, I buy organic products... I don't harm the environment. Multinationals might do it in other countries but not here, not where I live. It was always others who were despoiling the Earth, others who committed injustices, others who ruled, others who were wrecking the North Pole..., always others. We were blindfolded and were being led by a leash named welfare. We hid ourselves from the truth of what was happening on Earth, they lied to us and we lied to ourselves. We didn't want the truth. From our comfortable and easy lives, we avoided receiving information that could germinate the seeds of doubt. We didn't want anything that would make us rethink our lifestyles.

The planet, something too big or too small, depending on how you looked at it. We had no ties with it, but we did have them with the welfare and the hyper consumption. We could give up a plant or an animal species without blinking. What the hell one more, one less! But we couldn't give up the latest geek gadget, thought nothing of traveling four thousand miles to hold an important meeting or of renewing at least half of our closet each season.

If humanity could enjoy what we were living here in this forest, they would find their roots again. They would fill their void. They would know that they were part of something bigger. They would be able to listen and understand Mother Earth and then, they would not be able to live otherwise. Giving up the consumer society was not a waiver, it was just the natural thing to do.

I guess the power will be restored, but I can't imagine any of us going back to an urban life, getting back on the wheel of a denatured life. Where would we go if the owners of the land were to return? There must be more people around the world that, during these blackout months, had re-encountered Mother Earth.

If we have to leave, we'll look for them.

Meanwhile, Dylan and Ciarán are preparing a camp to hunt a deer. They have convinced us to go with them. It will be fun. A way to break with the routine. The entire group will leave a couple of days before the next full moon. The moonlight will be ideal to give them chase. We will sleep under the sky, they will hold and prepare hunting positions, and when they gun down the deer, they will go through the blood baptism with the children, their hunting initiation ritual.

The deer meat will be our major source of protein throughout the winter. I don't like the idea of killing a deer, but we need it.

* * *

Saturday, November 29th

Tokyo, Japan

When Bankei held his seclusion-weeks of meditation, pupils from many parts of Japan came to attend. During one of these gatherings a pupil was caught stealing. The matter was reported to Bankei with the request that the culprit be expelled. Bankei ignored the suggestion.

Later the pupil was caught in a similar act, and again Bankei disregarded the matter. This angered the other pupils, who drew up a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief, stating that otherwise they would leave in a block.

When Bankei had read the petition he called everyone before him. "You are wise brothers," he told them. "You know what is right and what is wrong. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I don't? I am going to keep him here even if the rest of you leave".

A torrent of tears cleansed the face of the brother who had stolen. All desire to steal had vanished.

Since air traffic was restored we, the family members, began to travel between the matrix cells. For the time being the use of the transport network was limited to families and the logistics of the corps. Electricity generation was no longer a problem. Plants and infrastructure designed to power a population of more than eight billion people were more than sufficient to meet the needs of less than one third of the population. However, there were still some shortages with fuel derived from fossil materials. Ener10 kept researching for energy sources, alternatives to petrol, which did not require the modification of existing vehicles.

During the month of November, the Tyo-Bronte factories managed to supply the entire demand of genetic enhancement modules. The month of November would end with about a billion adherees. All of them identified. Each of the members of the families with their four operating modules. The adherees, with the ID and service access modules according to their category in each of their pillars. We had built a market of one billion customers; loyal, predictable, submissive. There was no competition. They could not leave the corps. They produced and consumed. It was a perfect ecosystem for us, for corporations. Ecosystem instability could have come from the Islamic nation. But we had managed to redirect the situation. After the army agreed to talk to them and both sides pledged to abandon the use of mass destruction weapons, when it became evident that they had endangered the planet and Humanity as a whole, the Board of the nine pillars decided to intervene. By majority, we voted to open negotiations with the Islamic nation in order to integrate them into our structure, in order to settle the conflict in a permanent way. The Peace Army did not have many alternatives. They accepted a truce and the opening of official negotiations with them.

As Chairman of the nine pillars I took part in the peace process. There was only one way to achieve this, the Board had already accepted and voted. We had to integrate the Islamic nation in the nine pillars. They had the largest oil and gas reserves on Earth. That, as well as overpopulation, had been the trigger of it all. Perhaps we could manage to convert their natural reserves in the drive to a stable world peace. The Islamic nation could take control of the energy pillar. Surely they would ask for more. They represented a quarter of the planet's surface. They were going to want a similar stake in the Board of the nine pillars in the overall structure. We were prepared to cede control over two pillars, energy and natural resources. It would be easier for them to take over the African resources, the largest quarry in the world along with South America.

We held the first meetings in Paris. I explained to their Assembly the new world order. The opportunity to be part of it, to achieve peace in the world, a stable peace. The system did not compete over resources with other corporations or between nations, neither would it race to get larger market shares. We had designed the real global market, the flat world. The corps were the only producer. We had generated a standardized and unified offer. Everyone consumed our products, the corps products. Supply and demand crossed in a perfect way. The system would never produce more than demand could absorb, and demand would never ask for more than supply could produce. The Board of the nine pillars defined the production volume for each corp so that the set was always balanced. There were no monetary transactions between the pillars. Nor between the adherees. The corps were the ones to hold the monopoly of private property, always securely guaranteed by the Peace Army. The adherees had access to more or less

privileges, services, products, benefits..., depending on their contribution to the corp. A greater specialization and greater contribution to production would mean higher privilege levels.

It was absurd for them to remain anchored to the past. They had unified their nation, they had eradicated their borders. Were they going to maintain the capitalist system they had criticized and attacked for decades? Would they go back to the feudal system? To the warlords? It made no sense. They had suffered as many casualties as the West. Up to the truce, their population had suffered from the lack of energy, like the rest of the world. We knew they had the antivirus and that their Assembly had restored the supply in certain areas, those that sheltered and gave service to the Assembly. The corp establishment plan had also been designed to restore energy progressively, knowing the population would be mired in chaos and would need someone to restore stability, safety, the welfare they had lost. The nine pillars offered to share their plan. They would let the Assembly choose who would be in their families. The Assembly did not have to give up their power, they only needed a focus change. They could use their power under other parameters. Assembly members would manage with a new standard.

We were living the end of an era. The end of a civilization. It was time to build a new world. More balanced. Without destabilizing elements. Humanity should bet for progress, for research, for knowledge. Wasting creative energy on a competition process that had no purpose other than getting more prosperous, accumulate wealth and properties, according to the capitalists parameters, made no sense. Prosperity would come from the hand of scientific developments, from focusing on creative development, research, innovation. It could only be achieved through a balanced global production system designed that way since its inception. A system in which competition and the absurd obsession to grow and achieve greater market shares did not remove the focus from what really mattered; creativity, research and innovation. It was time to give Humanity a substantial leap in evolution, in scientific advances that were an improvement in the quality of life, in the control of the environment, in the exploration of space.

The Assembly should discuss it, explain the situation to the other voting members in the Islamic nation. If they were to participate in the new order, a single pillar did not seem enough. They controlled over a quarter of the planet. They should at least lead two pillars and have veto power on certain matters.

The talks were closed in Cairo. The Islamic nation agreed to join the new world order. They would take control of the pillars of energy and natural resources. They would absorb a quarter of the current families of these two pillars, the other three quarters should be absorbed by the rest of the pillars. They demanded a veto on the adoption of new laws and the creation of new

pillars. Their Army ought to be integrated into the Peace Army. Half of the family of that pillar should come from the Islamic nation. They also asked that at least one third of the productive cells of the defence pillar would be located in their territories, those they had unified since the blackout.

Successes were piling up. The month of November was not over yet. I had managed to negotiate the more comprehensive world peace in history. The Islamic nation population was estimated to be around one billion people. We designed the establishment plan for Africa, the Middle East and the occupied territories in Europe. The matrix cell of energy would be transferred to Al-Riyadh, the former Saudi Arabia. The new matrix cell of natural resources would be established in Johannesburg, the former South Africa. The families from Hreum and Ener10 accepted it pretty well. We all knew that peace was necessary. The folly of a world war with mass destruction weapons did not lead anywhere except to extinction. Large areas of the planet had been devastated. They would not be recovered for centuries. The population that had survived in nearby areas would have consequences for generations. We could not afford it. The families should lead by example. We should settle disputes. Eradicate violence and war. Forget the past months. The population would have to accept it and do the same. Without grudges. Rancour only leads to more resentment. We could not allow it.

The Assembly of the Islamic nation elected the representatives of their families. They were trained and the adhesion conferences started. Within three months we expected to have about six hundred million additional adheres in the corporations.

The first establishment plan merged with the new plan. Over the next year the new order would be set in motion. We estimated that we would have close to 2.5 billion adheres by that time, ninety percent of the world population, judging by the success rate we were getting in the adhesion conferences. Only ten percent of the population was not accepting the new order. The only thing that somewhat concerned us was that they might be uniting. They called themselves the resilient. They were much more numerous in South America than in the rest of the world. It seems it was a pseudo spiritual stream, born under what the embassies of Argentina and Brazil had reported during the first months after the blackout, the call of Gaia, the embrace of the common consciousness. They had bet on autarkic communities, on self-sufficiency. I do not know how they intend to survive! If that life was once almost a utopia now, without technology, it was completely unrealistic.

Seventh Law: "Do not maintain contact with unmodified humans that do not belong to one of the nine pillars".

The corps would not provide them with anything. They would have to reuse whatever they found in abandoned settlements. Their life would be

miserable. Sooner or later they would end up asking to be adheres. They would beg. They would enter the base of the production pyramid, with the minimal privileges. That is, if we allowed them let them join. Perhaps it was better that they served as examples. To reject them. Let them die, for their communities to disappear and slowly decay. The adheres would then realize they had made the right choice, there was no other option. The only thing that was feasible was to belong to the corps, to the system, to the new world order.

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Nubia's Desert, Sudan

Schahriar the king, then said: "Oh Schehrazada! How wonderful that story is! Oh, how inspiring! You have taught me, oh learned and discreet! And you have made me see the events that happened to others and I have had to carefully assess the words of kings and people before me, and the extraordinary and wonderful things that are worthy of reflection. And it is a fact that after listening to you during these thousand and one nights, my soul has deeply changed and it is embedded with cheer and the joy of living. So glory to the one who has given you so many selected gifts, oh my blessed vizier's daughter! You have been blessed with a fragrant mouth, and eloquent tongue and intelligence behind your forehead!"

Stories from the Arabian nights, "Conclusion"

A week before the full moon, Bushra told me I had to fast. Purify my body for the entrance ritual to the circle. During those days I was to remain inside my tent until twilight. Bushra told me I had to think about the stage I was leaving behind me. The cyclical stage of my life. The stage in which each moon purified and renewed my strength. The cycles had helped me to move in the spiral wheel of time. Each cycle had pushed me closer to my inner truth. The moons disappeared when each woman found her own ego. When she didn't need more exogenous forces to achieve harmony, the balance each woman had written in her fate, the place that only she could find inside herself.

I had to think about my own truth. It would be my reference point. My guidance in the final stretch of my life. My companion in my way to dusk. A

stage full of wisdom, wisdom that I could let wither or choose to share it and give light to those who were starting to live.

During those days, in the loneliness of my tent I went through all the great milestones of my life. I analysed the crossroads that I have founded over the years. I tried to think of how my life would have been, had I made different choices in any of those crossroads. I struggled to remember what led me to tilt the balance in one direction or the other. And I realized that in those decisive moments of change, life had led me through a path reserved just for me. I chose what to study, that is true, but I could only choose among the options that were known to me at that time. I chose to marry Pierre. It was also a limited choice. My circle of friends in Paris, while large, did not extend to more than five hundred people. We decided to have children, it was the right time to take the step. Pierre left me for a younger woman. Clearly that was not my decision, but it offered me the opportunity to find enough courage to overcome it and begin a new life in Zanzibar. Surely that was my most conscious choice, the only one I can consider as my own decision.

After what happened there, my only decision, my inner one, was to survive. Survive and overcome pain. My truth was life. My guidance was the light that lit my days, with the darkness that wrapped my nights and weaved my dreams. The path that I still had ahead was much shorter than the one I had already lived. My cycles would also shorten. From the time between two moons, to the time between two sunrises. I had to live every single day, as if it were the last. Enjoy every moment that life gave me.

During that fast, when I left my tent seclusion, my inner search, I always went to the sheikh's tent. I liked talking to him. My Arabic had improved quite a lot, enough to eliminate the need for Bushra to be my interpreter. Like all wise men, the sheikh had a knack for listening. He asked me about my life, the western customs, our history, our culture. He absorbed the knowledge in my words. He thought that to be a good leader it was necessary to learn about the mistakes and triumphs of other civilizations, of other peoples. Situations tended to repeat themselves over time. Some decisions taken by leaders throughout history had condemned to extinction entire cultures while others had helped them perpetuate in time.

There, barefoot, sitting on mats covering the sand desert of his tent, with his legs crossed under his white robe, he transmitted serenity through his own motion. He made me feel unique, special. He always called me Azrak emra'a. I think he never got to ask my real name.

The night before the entrance ritual into the circle, when I got to his tent, the sheikh asked me to go with him. We walked out of the limits of the camp. Heading to the west, to the sunset. The sun was already gone, but its reflection lit the sky with a blue-orange colour that gave all the surrounding a touch of unreality. The sheikh was staring at the horizon. He told me his wife

had died during the previous year's rainy season. When she died he thought his destiny was to walk alone to his twilight. He was convinced of this, until the Azrak emra'a arrived. He looked into my eyes while he held my hands. I was the talisman of the Beja people, but I had also become the light that illuminated his path. He saw inside me a wise, honest and kind woman. He was no longer young, but there was vigour and strength in his body to protect me and share my nights.

I still didn't know all the Beja customs. It didn't matter. My answer did not come from reason but from the heart. I brought my lips to his and kissed him. Our bodies melted into an embrace. The last rays of light turned dark as night fell, while the sheikh held my face in his hands and kissed my forehead, my eyelids, and my lips.

The ritual of entrance into the circle was an important milestone. I had to rest. He came with me to my tent. As soon as the ritual was over, he would announce our engagement to the bedana.

I could not sleep that night. Fasting. The ritual. The sheikh. My body was unable to process everything that was going on.

At dawn, Bushra came to my tent. The circle of knowledge had already prepared the tent with the smoke bath. They were waiting for me. When I went in, a pleasant smell stemmed from the tent, it smelled of incense mixed with other herbs and flower essences. All the women sat in a circle around a silk cushion, on which I was placed by Bushra. They sang repetitive chants that I could not understand. Suddenly it all went silent and Bushra started the ritual. They stripped me naked so I would be able to enter into my new stage, clean, with no memory, without any links to my former life. They washed me with scented water to cleanse my body on the outside, just as I had purified my inside by fasting. With al-hinnā³² they painted a spiral on my belly, to recall the cyclical stage I was leaving behind and a disc in the palms of my hands, to represent my entry into the circle of knowledge.

Afterwards each of them spoke of her ego, her truth, her harmony, her balance and listened to mine that, expressed differently, was very similar to theirs.

They repeated the chants. I was covered with a white embroidered robe and each one gave me two kisses. The ritual was over. I was part of the circle of knowledge. Bushra closed the ritual with the traditional formula and said she wanted to share something with them. Bushra was the sheikh's sister. I hadn't any doubt about what she was sharing.

The announcement of our union was received with great joy all over the circle. Kisses and hugs, along with smiles and greetings were repeated by each of the women. Bushra also gave me a gift, a te-saqwit embroidered by her and made for me. It wasn't what tradition dictated, but it would have

been too complex for me, and I didn't have that much time. She hugged me while telling me that from that moment onwards we were as sisters. Several weeks ago the sheikh had talked to her about his feelings.

When we left the bath's tent all the bedana was aware of the news. The sheikh put his arm over my shoulder. Together we were congratulated by each and every one of the members of the tribe.

That night the sheikh sacrificed four kids. Each family of the tribe sacrificed another kid to join into our joy. The women prepared couscous, sour butter and o'tam. There was a lot of goat and camel cheese as well as plenty of the beer they prepared with the harob.

The flames of the bonfire danced into the sky as if to touch the stars. The music did not stop until late at night. Some of the elders knew I had been learning to play the rababah during the last weeks. Between them, they managed to make me lose all sense of shame and play to all the tribe. They appreciated my efforts to get adapted to their life. They celebrated the joy and luck of their sheikh. After my little concert the party kept going. They danced around the fire. They sang and shrieked joyous shouts. We retired to the tent of the sheikh. He led me to the right division of the tent, the one reserved for men. I was still wearing the white embroidered robe with which the women had dressed me during the entrance ritual to the circle. Under the dim light of the full moon, filtered through the cracks of the tent, the sheikh undressed me. He explored my body inch by inch, with an experienced hand, delicately. He enjoyed giving me pleasure, exciting each of my senses, awakening my sensuality, my desire. My libido was born again. The wounds of the rapes, those that Bushra couldn't cure with her treatments, healed. I asked him to have me, to make me his. Together, with the music and the celebration songs acting as our own backdrop, we reached the climax.

That night I dreamt I was the wind that moved the clouds, the wind that made the sand of the desert move constantly, the wind that flared up the fire. That night I knew that I had been born to find the sheikh.

Five days later we brought down the tents and packed up. I headed the caravan next to the sheikh. It was the beginning of our trip to the north.

* * *

Totnes, UK

As long as the heart beats, as long as the body beats, I do not understand that a being possessed of a will could be dominated by despair.

"Journey to the centre of the earth", Jules Verne

We managed to convince them that it was necessary to lift their self-siege. They didn't have to open the town but they had to send patrols to the outside. They needed information about what was going on in the rest of the county. They should try to know what was happening in England. Maria and I volunteered. We had made it out through a hell of a journey in hostile territory. We were used to it. We had experience.

After beating about the bush for a long time they ended up accepting. We would go with three members of their patrols. They had weapons. If things had not changed, we would need them.

The first forays outside the wall didn't throw too much light. Actually they were of no avail. We sighted, in the distance, groups of people that the three of the fucking patrols identified as part of the neighbouring clans. They were scared shitless. They didn't want contact with anyone. They didn't let us approach them. They said it could jeopardize the entire community.

Fear has never been a good counsellor. They were blinded, stiff, scared to their bones. They preferred the slow death in that burrow to venturing and discovering they had other alternatives. They lacked the punch. They lacked guts. We spoke to the assembly. Maria and I didn't need weapons. They

should let us go alone. Under our responsibility. At the end of the day we were not part of their community. If we died they wouldn't be responsible. It would have been our choice.

It wasn't until mid-November when we got the fucking permission of the assembly. I was at the limit, I kept telling Maria we had to flee from Totnes. They were dying. I didn't want to die.

In the assembly not all of them agreed, but since voting got them horny, they voted. Democratically, by only one ballot, with one more vote on our side, we were authorized to leave. Richard was among the few who clearly saw that they needed information, to come out of the hole. He behaved. He provided maps of the area. The closest and largest populated town was Plymouth. It had always been an important port. Before the blackout, nearly three hundred thousand people lived there. Southampton was somewhat bigger, but it was a hundred and forty miles away. Plymouth was only twenty five miles away, forty kilometres. We could get there in a couple of days, allowing for stops in the villages found on the way.

We followed the same system we had used to cross Spain and France. We advanced across the countryside, but unlike the previous time, we did it during the day, and we tried to get closer to the villages we saw from the distance. Many of them were completely abandoned. In some we could hear and see signs of violence from afar. Others were ghost towns that closed the windows and shutters as soon as they saw us. People trusted no-one. The first night we decided to stop at Ivybridge. We saw some people inside the houses. We called on many doors, but none would open up. They didn't even want to talk to us. It wasn't being very useful. We should have skived off. We should have thought just of ourselves and headed directly to London.

With the first light of day we were on our way. We arrived at Plymouth before ten o'clock. The city was razed. It had been the scene of pitched battles. On the streets we could see the skeletons of burned vehicles, containers, furniture. The vandals had smashed windows, lamps, walls. The fire had reached entire neighbourhoods of the city that now showed nothing but the skeletons of buildings and their ashes, as a reminder of the experienced violence.

We decided to go to the port. If there was any information to be learned, it would be there. Maybe there was still some movement of ships. If we couldn't find out anything at the harbour, I was in favour of heading to London directly, without passing through Totnes. Maria didn't agree. We started a discussion that was suddenly stopped by the sound of a recording. It was the voice of a woman powered by speakers. We stopped. We heard the sound of an engine in the distance. Suddenly, we turned a corner and saw it. It was a truck. Driving slowly through the streets of Plymouth. It announced

a meeting. Something about the new world order. In the soccer stadium of Argyle Home Park, at 13:00.

We were seeking information. We couldn't find a better opportunity. We walked through the streets of Plymouth. It was a fucking wreck. Everything was destroyed. We arrived at the stadium well in advance. Long lines of people lined in front of the door, waiting to enter.

At one o'clock, according to the clock that was displayed on the screens of the state, the doors opened. They were guarded by military patrols. I don't know if they belonged to the British army, to the militia or to someone else, but they were armed to their teeth with all kind of weapons.

Electricity was being restored slowly in certain parts of the world. It was thanks to the joint efforts of nine corporations. During these months the world had radically changed. Governments had fallen, more than two thirds of the population had died from lack of food and wars. The Islamic nation and the corporations had managed to sign a lasting peace agreement. The Islamic nation was now part of the corporations. The world, mankind, had suffered, but we should now look forward. Forget the barbarity of the past few months. The deaths. The suffering. Corporations, including the part integrated by the Islamic nation, wanted to bring welfare back to the population. They were restoring the production of services and commodities, thereby ensuring the welfare and safety of all. They needed our help. All were welcome. We had to rebuild a battered world. Overcome the pain. Learn from past mistakes and go for a more balanced and more efficient society. From now on there would be no governments. The nine corporations had created a transnational board committee that encompassed all the countries of the world. The corps would identify the people's needs and design a world production system to cover them. Ultra-capitalism had led civilization to its own death. There would be no currency in the future. Each would have access to services and products depending on their work. The corps guaranteed to all those who worked for the system that they would not lack anything; food, education, health or leisure. We had to work as a team. We had to join our efforts. To contribute to the reconstruction of a new world.

Everyone who wanted to join was more than welcome. There were only nine rules. The nine rules of the nine pillars. All those who wanted to adhere and accept the nine rules would receive as compensation the nine commitments of the corps.

It was awesome! They had made it. They had restored the bloody power. The world would work again. Who cared whether it was with corporations, multinationals, politicians or with any other son of a bitch. Things were going to be back to normal.

Maria stopped me. I would have joined the system right there. You just had to sign and they fit you with a subcutaneous chip with which you could be identified in the new society.

Maria insisted that we had to return to Totnes. To share the information with them. They had taken us in when we were at our lowest. We owed them. If we had to go, I wanted to go as soon as possible, before I changed my mind. We started a non-stop journey. We did the whole way back without stopping even once. The next day, we arrived at Totnes at noon. We were exhausted, but excited. We saw light at the end of the tunnel.

The assembly met immediately. I tried to summarize everything about the corps, the pillars, the rules and the commitments. To be honest, in the end there was only one message to be conveyed: Electricity had been restored in the world, still partially, by regions, but the process had begun. London hosted the major production cell from the energy pillar. The population had dramatically declined. They were looking for people. They admitted everyone who wished to join their corporations. They guaranteed security, food, access to energy, to housing, health care and education. It was, by far, the best choice we could all make. Actually, it was the only one.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

The air is so pure it hurts when I breathe. There's so much light, I can hardly open my eyes. It smells like moss, damp earth, rain, wind, dry leaves. We died in the bunker and we have been reborn into a new life. We're part of the neo-tribe. We shall start this together.

It's time for the journey.

Mark actually had a plan. It didn't imply collective suicide but it did entail blowing up the house. Last night he did it. Since the day they arrived he kept saying they were a threat, that they couldn't be there when the family returned from wherever they had gone. They would kill the men, rape and enslave the women, who knows what they would do with the kids! They were urban waste. If they had come so far from the city, something had changed in Vancouver. Perhaps the war had intensified. Perhaps they had signed a peace treaty and the looting was no longer taking place in the cities. They were scavengers. They arrived under the night cover. Armed to their teeth. They approached the house just like a military commando would have. They wanted to take by surprise whoever lived there. For two days they combed the area, until they came to the conclusion that there was nobody. Then the plundering began. They killed the goats, the rooster, the chickens and the ducks they managed to gun down. They spent the day eating, ransacking the pantry, wiping out what little was still growing in the orchard and the veg garden.

Mark didn't want them there. The family would arrive at any time from wherever they were. There would be a massacre. He couldn't allow it.

I didn't quite understand what we could do, the bunker's timer was about to be up. It only rested four more days to fulfil the 140 days of confinement, but it couldn't be over-ridden. That was something that Mark had made clear from day one. It was at that point that Mark uncovered his last card, his ace up his sleeve. He couldn't risk having these types of people in our farm once we got out of the bunker. Years ago he had placed explosives at the base of the Earthship. Dynamite, activated by remote control from the bunker.

Since their arrival, Mark had studied their habits, their schedules. They were careless. After combing the area, they had dropped off the guard. They had brought alcohol. Most days they ended up drunk. The nights were cold. They slept inside.

Ten days ago the family had left the farm. They were about to return. On November the 28th, they rode the great bacchanal. We saw them drinking. We heard them screaming. When night fell, everyone was inside the house. We assumed asleep. They wouldn't have time to react. There was enough charge to blow up ten houses like ours. Mark pressed the button. The noise was deafening. The earth trembled. The bunker shook. Through the periscope we could only see a cloud of dust. Rachel didn't stop crying. Patrick was in a corner, all curled up. He covered his ears with his hands. He also cried.

I asked Mark if he thought they had all died. He didn't have the slightest doubt. The blast was probably heard from miles away. If the family was somewhere in the mountains they would have listened to the blast. They would soon be back. We had to think and plan our coming out of the bunker. We had to allow enough time to explain that we had done it for their own sake, that we were the owners of the land, and that those people would have killed their whole group.

When the timer buzzed, the roof hatch would open up. It had been the gateway to our imprisonment. Once open, only ten feet of soil would keep us from the outside world. It would be compacted. We would have to break it from the inside of the bunker, we would have to grind it. It wouldn't take us more than an hour to open the hole to get out. The dogs would hear the sound long before the members of the family realized there was something going on. They would give them advanced warning. We should expect them to be waiting outside, armed, expectant, fearful, charged with adrenaline, ready to defend themselves. Mark didn't think they would leave the farm before the bunker opened up.

I was a nervous wreck. We were just one step from the awaited day. About to regain our lost freedom. What had happened in the world during the last five months? What would we do? If we stayed in our land, we had to start from scratch. The Earthship was blown to pieces along with the barn, the dairy and the orchard with all the fruit trees. It would be difficult to get

any type of material to reconstruct the whole thing. Winter was close. It would be cold. Rachel was still a toddler. She wouldn't be able to make it. We had to think about her. The wiser choice would be to go to Vancouver. Find out the news about what was happening in the world. Perhaps normalcy had been restored.

In four days we would know whether we had managed to overcome our first test: to come out of our confinement alive. A closure that had weakened us. We were ghosts. The tedium had sapped our strength. The routine had bent our will. The silence, the whispers, the artificial light, the same monotonous food, the permanent musty smell. A horizon made up of four walls.

In just four days, the world would be open to us again. With uncertainty. As a new path to be explored. As a blank sheet of paper where we would write our new future... In just four days.

* * *

December

Tokyo, Japan

A long time ago in Japan, they often used lanterns made out of bamboo and paper, carrying a candle inside. A blind man went to visit a friend. When the visit ended, his friend offered him a lantern for his way back home.

"I do not need a lamp," he said "dark or light is the same for me".

"I know you do not need a lantern to find your way". Said the friend "But if you do not carry one, someone might bump into you, so you should take it".

This way the blind man took the lantern and left to go home. He had not gone too far when someone ran headlong into him.

"Watch where you go". Exclaimed the blind man. "Don't you see this lantern?"

"Your lamp is off, brother," replied the stranger.

Resilients are undermining my popularity, my authority. They are threatening the world order. The attacks to some of our production cells began a few weeks ago. Mainly to the food and energy units. In some cases they steal, in others they devastate entire crops. The Peace Army cannot eradicate them. They work in small commandos. They follow a guerrilla warfare strategy. They pop up just as fast as they disappear. Some fail, but the rest do not seem daunted. They fight in the name of freedom, the liberation of Gaia. They speak of saving the Earth from the exploitation to which corporations are subduing the planet. They are against GMOs, against

the pharmaceutical companies, against the Peace Army, against the genetic enhancement implants. They want to destabilize the world order.

Some adheres are echoing their proclamations. We are starting to have resilient graffiti in the production cells. I do not understand how they have got organized, neither how they have been able to seep into our cells. There are not that many. The Peace Army intelligence thinks that there cannot be more than three hundred million, worldwide. More than half are concentrated in South America. We should have established more control in that territory. There is no matrix cell there. From the beginning, they have been voicing those absurd stories about Gaia, the common consciousness and the return to the community.

The Board blames it on me. They want a scapegoat. They do not understand that the problem does not come from the world order I have designed. They are fanatics. They have nothing to lose. They live in deprivation. They do not mind dying. The families are asking for a crackdown on crime. The Board has passed new laws against resilient. I feel observed, subdued, even within my own family. My last meeting with Yuito Bronde did not go well. He questioned my ability, my leadership. He said that I'm putting the viability and status of the whole leisure family at risk. If we lose a share of power in the Board, the nine pillars could become unstable. Some of the other families could want to get more power. Our power. We could disappear. The major general of the Peace Army had contacted him. He was worried about the course of events. He, of course, had stood up for me but we ought to give a blunt response.

I explained that we were talking about sporadic attacks. They were under control. They did not affect the production capacity. The adheres could not leave the corps, not without dying. The genetic modification modules prevented it. The resilient seed would not grow among adheres.

Again, Yuito expressed his concern and reiterated his trust on me.

I went over our conversation, "Genetic modification modules prevent desertion". Yes, to almost everyone. Everyone except me. My implant came from before the blackout. I had been the guinea pig of the first development team. None of them are alive today. They were among the first raid teams. They did not last long. They knew of all the improvements I had implanted in my body. They designed them. The main difference compared to any other existing implant, besides being able to remove it without any risk, was that I had the capacity to store every single detail I perceive and its real-time transmission into my own shielded network node. I was no longer young. Improvements in physical performance would not be of much use in my worn body. However, being able to record what my five senses perceived in every second of my life and having it stored in a place, that for the time being

was secured for my personal use, a place where I could treat the information, display it, study it... That was priceless.

After my meeting with Yuito I reviewed the recordings of the last few weeks. One by one, since we received the news about the first attack, on December the 3rd. It was not my own paranoia. I was being watched. The Board planned to make an attempt on my life. The decision to change the chairman had been already taken. Who would drive the attack? My own family? The Peace Army? The most efficient method would be to use a special commando of the Army.

They knocked on my door. It was my wife. The commander of the Seventh Fleet was here. The silver production cell in the mines of Pierina, former Peru, had been attacked by a resilient group.

The commander himself. He really did not want to leave any loose ends.

My wife held the door of my meditation room to let the commander in. Gentle, polite, courteous, he invited her into the room. There were no secrets for the chairman's wife.

She would also die. She did not deserve it. But it had been written in her destiny.

I closed the access to my particular information processing centre. I blocked the access to my node. Sooner or later the door would be opened. Whatever happened in the next few minutes would be recorded. The world would know. The truth would be known.

The commander stood in front of the door. Blocking unwanted access. He was concise, to the point. The attack was true but I knew too well he had not come for that. I was not actually a member of any family. The families of the nine pillars had existed long before I dared to think about them. They had always existed. They had always been the world's elite, a class designed and prepared to rule the fate of Humanity. I was just a worker; creative, effective, efficient, disciplined, very proud and too egomaniac to realize that the families had used me.

The new world order was taking its first steps before we had our first meeting. I helped with the antivirus, I helped to give coherence to the new world order, but others designed it, not me. A long time ago. Before the blackout. That had been only the trigger, the excuse, the button that set in motion the machinery to remove the governments, the borders, the private property and above all, to solve the problem of overpopulation that was suffocating the world.

I had been a cog in the wheel of change. I was not necessary any longer. I had believed my leadership role up to the point of ridicule. I was just a puppet. The resilient riots had been the perfect excuse for the Board to take

the decision. They were not the cause, just an excuse. The real reason was that I had never been anything else than a simple adherer, too deified and blinded, so much that I even thought I really belonged to the families. I thought I had reached the top. I dreamed I had entered the Olympus. It was time for everyone to return to his place. The pantomime was over.

The commander was right. My lust for power had blinded me. That first list of elite families in the warship..., when I thought the list was prepared in advance... It had been. I was wrong. I had wanted to believe that I had come to their same conclusions. I had wanted to convince myself of my shrewdness. We all make mistakes at some point. The commander would know that his moment was right now. An adherer did not deserve so many explanations. The injection he was shooting into me would have been more than enough.

While my brain and my body began to befuddle, I clung to my revenge; sooner or later my node would open and, at that time, the whole world would know the truth.

* * *

Aswan, Egypt

And since then no one could ever find their footprints and no one heard of them or the place of their retreat. Because, in the land, only a few among the sons of men are worthy of joy, of following the path that leads to happiness and of approaching the house where the joy lies.

Stories from the Arabian nights, "The tender story of Prince Jasmine and Princess Almond"

The caravan waded across the Nile on the third day of our trip, before reaching the fifth waterfall. We crossed the desert following a northwest direction up to the place where the wadi-milk joins one of the Nile's trunks, south of the third waterfall, south of the ancient city of Dongola. Wadi el-milk was for years an affluent of the Nile. The large droughts dried it centuries ago. Its bed had been used, since then, as a track for moving camel herds between Sudan and Egypt. The tribe took the path of Wadi el-milk. It would lead them to the heart of the sandstone aquifer. There, despite the lack of rain, they would have access to the water they would need to live and keep the livestock alive. We followed the course of the Nile. The first night that we travelled alone, we camped on the outskirts of the ancient city of Dongola, between the ancient pyramids of the kingdom of the Kushite and the medieval ruins of the kingdom of Makuria. The Nile had been a source of life from ancient ages, hundreds of peoples, kingdoms, cultures, had drunk and lived thanks to the rich lands around the Nile.

In the warm desert nights, under a blanket of stars covering our heads, the sheikh told me stories about the Egyptian and Nubian dynasties, about

the black pharaohs, the Kushite, the queens and deities that lived in the corridors of the pyramids. I was fascinated by his knowledge. He was an inexhaustible source of knowledge, on top of an experienced lover. Each night he proved to me that, despite not being a young man, his passion and his vigour had not aged. Ours was the only tent that was set up every night. It was a provisional tent, much lighter than the one the sheikh had in the semi-permanent camp. The rest of the group, including Bushra, slept around the fire. Before each dawn we decamped. We moved towards the north until the sun got to its zenith. It was hard for the camels to walk under the central hours of heat. Generally we chose open areas close to the Nile to set up the makeshift camp that sheltered us.

It took us eight days to arrive to the tribes' meeting point. The Nile carried us to the artificial lake of Nubia who drew a singular dividing line with Egypt. A boundary-shaped horn mocked the straight lines dividing Africa, to steal a piece of the territory of the neighbour nation. Those imaginary lines drew by the white man to share out the richness of a continent, but that neither the desert nor the river could understand or respect.

The lake was the result of the construction of the Aswan Dam. When it was constructed, the entire Nubian population, several hundreds of thousands of people had to be moved. Their lands were flooded by water on both sides of the Sudan border. Wadi Halfa, Sudan's first river port controlled by the Nubian tribes, was buried along with the rail station and all the wealth that the traffic and trade generated in that area. The international community decided to create New Halfa as a way of compensation. A project to convert people from a nomadic into a sedentary lifestyle. To convert them into farmers. Those tribes who agreed became slaves to a system that never worked. The dam left New Halfa's land without water. They promised an irrigation system which took years to become a reality. Meanwhile, they lost their spirit, they got impoverished and forgot that their lives and their souls were bound to the desert, not the cities. Those who stopped traveling lost their condition of free men in the tribes and failed to gain the respect or the acceptance in the cities. They were condemned to live in no man's land.

The lake had three hundred miles up to Aswan. The meeting was not so far north. It would be held during the winter solstice, at a hundred miles distance to the north of Wadi Halfa, to the west of the lake. At a crossroads in the trade routes of the camel caravans.

Our group arrived two days after the full moon. Many heads of the tribes were already there. In the middle of nowhere, in the heart of the desert, stood a camp of several square miles. All the tribes, from the Red Sea to Libya, were convened to that gathering. Somewhere in Algeria, the rest of the tribes of Al-Ma▯rib, would hold a similar meeting with the same target,

deciding whether or not to accept the agreements signed by the Assembly of the Islamic nation.

They all knew the sheikh. It seemed he also knew every person at the camp. During the two nights before the meeting began, we shared our supplies and water with the other groups of the nomadic tribes. They all worked together, they all contributed, they all saluted and honoured Azrak emra'a, talisman of the Beja and consort of the first sheikh. During those days I needed to really concentrate if I wanted to understand at least some parts of the talks, and it made me end up completely exhausted. Both nights I had to retire before the others had even started to think about leaving the fires die.

The winter solstice arrived and the official meeting started along the morning. The silence was deathly. One speaker talked through a loudspeaker. The sound travelled through the plain desert like in an auditorium. The orator belonged to the Assembly of the Islamic nation. He had been sent to spread the decisions of the Assembly throughout the tribes and get their ratification.

The war had ended. The Islamic nation and the West had signed an enduring peace, a peace that promised to be stable. After conquering the European territories, the contest expanded to the US, to the west and to China and India, to the east. The Assembly was not proud of it. Both sides had used mass destruction weapons. Millions of people died in both the Islamic and enemy territory. Had the war continued much longer, all Humanity would have run serious danger of extinction. It had been necessary to make peace. In a first treaty the opening of a truce was agreed with the aim of opening talks with the West. The old Governments of what they called the first world had fallen, the countries had succumbed to chaos and the population, lost in the absence of leaders or guides, had barely been able to survive. They estimated that two thirds of the Population had died.

Western countries had united to rebuild a new world. A world adapted to today's reality, to the hand we had been dealt. During the talks that were held, the chairman of the new supranational Board stated and explained the new order. It was focused on moving forward in technology to improve the worldwide quality of human life. They wanted to erase the global inequalities, that only half a year ago had divided the world into the outcast and the fortunate. They were burying the capitalist system, the model of unlimited growth, of unlimited offer. They were proposing a system without a currency. The basic needs of the human beings had been analysed and defined so corporations could cover them all and the people could contribute, in lesser or greater extent, to the corporations with their work. In return to their work, each person would receive a number of privileges that gave them access to basic services and products that corporations put at their disposal.

The corporations were run by families. The most qualified for organizing and managing the production. Those who adhered to the corporations would also be directed to adhere to a family, depending on the type of work they were to develop.

He spoke about the nine rules, the nine compromises. He explained the organization of the productive and matrix cells. He delved into how the new system would correct the inefficiencies of the past. Cells would be designed to achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency. Centralized networks would be avoided. Population and production would be scattered. Technology would allow bridging distances, globalizing and connecting the dispersed populous clusters. Natural resources would no longer be plundered in the poor areas to enrich the wealthy ones. There would be no boundaries. There would be no countries. Humanity was together to achieve balance, stability.

The new order had been designed while the Islamic nation was still at war with the West, but they wanted to seal a lasting peace. Getting to live in harmony, without disputes with the Islamic nation. They offered to be part of the new world order. To take control of part of the corporations.

The Assembly of the Islamic nation, after much deliberation, had accepted the offer. We could not afford a longer war. We could not allow the population to keep dying by millions. The world had to reach a balance. We had to move away from squabbles, competition, power struggles and pledge to the development of mankind as a whole. The Assembly had elected the members of the Islamic nation who would be part of the families in charge of the energy and natural resources corporations. They were the two pillars that would be under the Islamic control. The establishment plan in Africa and Europe would be implemented under the command of the families that the Assembly had designated. The matrix cells of those two pillars had already been moved, the energy cell from London to Al-Riyadh and the natural resources cell from Moscow to Johannesburg.

All the tribes were useful to the system. Each and every one of them and those they represented could help. They would produce under the policies designed by the corps. Their work would ensure their access to health, water, leisure and food. They could at last leave their nomadic life, the hard life in the desert, they could enjoy progress, the scientific breakthroughs. The production cells needed help. He, in behalf of the Assembly, had come to ask for it.

During that day and the following, questions to the representative of the assembly kept flowing in. The tribes didn't see any advantage in abandoning the life they had lived for centuries, to join a new order designed by Westerners and controlled by families who they didn't know. They, themselves, were already organized in families, in Bedana. They knew each sheikh of each bedana, they knew all the families that lived under the

influence of the Nile. They recalled what happened in Wadi Halfa. The promises made to the Nubian people then, reminded of what they were offering now. They were promised water, a way of life. A guaranteed job and services to which they had never before had access to. Everything was a lie. They had ended up with a miserable life, several generations later it was still wretched and creepy. They had lost their pride. The desert did not accept them any longer. They had become weak.

The tribes' representatives began to hold smaller gatherings with no more of three or four tribes represented at each. The majority agreed. Ratifying the agreements of the Assembly would steal their way of life. It would make them slaves of a system, an order that was not theirs. Some tribes, those who have suffered the most due to the climate change and the extreme droughts over the last years, thought it could be a good alternative. Their way of life was doomed to die. They had the chance to join a new order, something that was coming to life at this precise moment in history. They would not be displaced because all were new to the system. They would not suffer rejection. They would not be left in no man's land as it had happened to the Nubian people.

Related tribes began closing positions in small groups. The last day of that year, the representative of each tribe spoke. The sheikh was brief:

"The Beja people do not ratify the agreements signed by the Assembly. Nor do we reject them. We have always been free people. Our blood is half salt and half sand of the dessert. We will not give up our land, our traditions, or our way of life. We will not become slaves. The desert has taken care of our people for more than five thousand years. We prefer to accept its protection to the protection of those corporations you have spoken of. As long as the new order does not interfere with our lives, the Beja people will disappear into the depths of the desert. The corps will not know anything about the Beja".

The night before the sheikh told me that the jinns of the prophecy were still free. They had changed their costume, their mask, but were still the same jinns who brought darkness and death into the world. The only safe haven was to return to one's origins. The embrace of Mother Earth, of the desert.

* * *

London, UK

It seems to me, Golan, that the advance of civilization is nothing more than an exercise in limiting privacy.

"Foundation's Edge", Isaac Asimov

Totnes's assembly failed out to come out of its spiral. They began twiddling their thumbs. Musing on what they should or shouldn't do. For Maria and because they had helped us in our difficult times, I held one week pretending I was paying attention to their deliberations. Then I told Maria that, with or without her, I was leaving. London was waiting for us. Totnes had signed its death sentence. There were people able to deal with dodgy situations and others that got blocked. Totnes was in the second group. I didn't want to be a part of it. Maria was kind of reluctant at the beginning, but in the end she agreed. We had more than three hundred miles ahead. Nothing compared to what we had already walked.

In ten days we got to London. It was night. Since we had landed in the UK, the daylight hours had been decreasing. We were near the solstice. The days were short. The nights long and cold, even with all the warm clothes we were wearing. We reached the city from the Heathrow area. About three miles from the airport, we stopped to take pleasure in the view. It was like a mirage. There were lights. The airport towers were on. We saw a plane approaching. It was true. Not only had they managed to restore electricity, they had also resumed air traffic. Normality was coming back to the world. We got a rush of optimism. One thing led to the other. It was goddamn cold,

but the hug of joy was followed by a kiss, then a peck, my hands warmed up and went down the Maria's bum. I squeezed it. I was somehow playful and I put my hand to work a little bit higher. What a pair of boobs! Her hands too, went unruly. We haven't had a fuck since we arrived at the gates of Totnes. We had caught their bloody depression. Everything would change now. We had recovered the lucky star.

After sex, we decided to make a stop and stay overnight before entering the city. There were about twenty miles to downtown London. We would leave early, before dawn. We would get there before eleven.

Our arrival into London was kind of odd. The city looked abandoned. The outskirts of town were even more destroyed than Plymouth. Death was in the air. The few buildings still standing were empty. The ashes and the black remains of fires that must have swept the city, covered everything. There were no people on the street. However, when we approached the centre of the city, we began to see life. There were people working on the streets. Machines removing collapsed buildings debris, cleaning teams erasing the traces of chaos, operators working in different recovery tasks. There were some cars circulating but, above all, there were lorries and buses carrying people. The military tanks had taken possession of central London. Armed soldiers patrolled the streets and thousands of posters indicated how to reach the Ener10 productive cell. We went through the triumphal arch of Wellington, now entirely black, like the statue that crowned it. I guess it was the result of large bonfires, a souvenir from the barbarism. We went to Buckingham Palace, crossing what once were beautiful urban gardens. Of the hundred-year-old trees I remember from my trips to London, there was hardly one or two still standing. Wood can be burned and in a city without power, any combustion material was scarce. We kept going until we arrived to Ener10's offices. They were very close to St. James gardens. They had worked hard on their own block. Some missing statues, broken windows in the building, but the area was clean.

The staging was awesome. There were military tanks surrounding the entire block. In each of the four entrances, thousands of people lined up. People like us who wanted to join the new system. People looking for work, protection, security. We chose one at random. Soon came a boy giving out several flyers to all of us in line,. In one of we could read the nine rules and the nine commitments. In the others there was a detailed explanation of the energy pillar. A single corporation was in charge of the production, generation, storage, installation and management of the grids in every production cell. They were responsible for the research and development of new energy sources. The name of the corporation was Ener10. However, the matrix cell was not in London, it was in Saudi Arabia.

Goddamn it! After all we had gone through, after the slaughter, invasion, our nearly five months of flight to escape the Islamic regime, we had finished

lining up to adhere to a corporation controlled by the Islam. Millions of dead people and just a few meetings of the bigwigs and they had decided to sign an alliance and become partners. It was fucking pathetic but we didn't have many alternatives. It was better not to get upset about it.

Each cell was designed to have a very high degree of self-sufficiency. Among all the production cells there were adherees from the nine pillars, depending on the type of training and preparation they had. If we adhered, we would belong to the energy pillar in the family that was best suited to our knowledge, one in which our contribution could be optimized. In this, they hadn't been too original. They had organized it under the typical matrix structure of all multinationals.

It was clear where Maria would end up. The energy pillar, under the family of energy. We were in one of the energy production cells and she had a master degree on the matter. But what about me?

In the brochure they gave us, there was also a list of the nine pillars with an explanation of their objectives and working rules. How could a marketing guy contribute to a system where competition had disappeared? In an organization ruled by monopolies? I guess, in the end, the privileges you had were somehow like money and, after all, you would be able to use them as you pleased. You could spend more or less food, consumer goods, transport, leisure or whatever. Someone should do the sweet-talking to make them spend their points on products of one pillar and not the other, or maybe the balanced system they talked about left little or even no choice to the adherees and they were holding us as a herd.

After some thought, I decided I would try to join the family of consumer goods. Amazing! I was going to depend on the one hand on Muslims and on the other on the Chinese. Didn't I want a global world? Here it was!

While in the queue, I was thinking of the system, this new order that had been created. It left little room for improvisation. The new rules were heavy to digest. With the genetic improvement module any adheree was caught by the balls. If you wanted to adhere you had to accept the first rule, the chip. Once you were in, the eighth rule reminded you that you were not allowed to leave the corporation. I'm sure that they fidget with those implants and make your life a living hell if you violated any rules. Because if you got expelled, as explained in the ninth rule, what would they do with the chip? Would they just take it out and let you go your merry way? Then again, where would you go? How would you make a living? If you no longer had the implant, you were not allowed to have any relationship with the corporations at all. That left you abandoned to your luck. We had suffered in person how bringing home the bacon was no picnic under the current conditions, without energy, or anyone to protect you, without knowing if you would be able to eat everyday.

That's the way it was. I wanted to return to a comfortable life. Me and thousands of guys who were queuing to get a shot with an electronic implant that would bind us with gold chains to whatever corporation we joined.

At the end of the day it would not be so different from the life we led before. It had its good side. No more looking for gigs. Once in a corporation, you would remain in it forever. Working hours were limited. Nothing like “we have a launch so we have to stay here till five in the morning or we won’t make it”. We wouldn’t have to pay taxes. No more politicians bullshitting us. I guess once things take off smoothly, you may even be allowed to ask to be transferred to other cells. That doesn’t imply you leave the corporation and I guess they will need people to move around; knowledge sharing, team-building and all those hollow words that make the multinationals as horny as a three balled tomcat.

I kept my paranoia to myself. I didn’t want to share my woes and tribulations with Maria and piss her off.

We had to stay in the queue for a couple of nights until it was our turn. A soldier, under strict numerical order, gave us access to a huge room with perfectly aligned rows of tidy tables. They were dispatching as in a supermarket. In the leaflets they gave us, the last page was a form to fill out your data; personal and professional. Lying about any of the data was a violation of the ninth rule.

During my turn the ‘cashier’ on duty asked me the sixty four thousand dollar question “Have you read the leaflets and understand and accept all that in them is explained?” My yes led her to the following step: introducing my data on a computer. I started to tell my story, that I was a marketing guy, that I believed I could contribute the most to the consumer goods family. She asked me to keep my mouth shut. This decision was not up to her. Based on the data, the computer would decide the family to which I would belong and my status within the family.

Hopefully the computer wouldn’t fuck it up.

In fifteen minutes the adhesion process was over. A shot. A first reading of the implant to ensure it worked properly and there, on the computer screen, on the ‘corp-cash *register*’, in a completely impersonal way, my destiny was written:

Food Family

Energy Pillar

Category 8

Maria, as expected, was identified as a member of the family of energy, inside the energy pillar. Her category was 15.

If I had a partner or any family I should go along with them to the thirteenth floor to complete the identification process of personal relationships. It would give me access to a shared apartment with the people registered with me. If I was alone I had to go to the twenty-first floor.

Maria and I left the room at about the same time. It was time to decide. “Thirteenth floor or twenty-one?” I didn’t make it sound very romantic. I know. She looked at me with those big grey eyes that made me crazy about her. “Let’s give the thirteenth a try, you won’t regret it”. She laughed. Without answering she went to the elevator. I followed her. That butt drove me insane. The arrow was pointing up. We entered. Both floors were already pushed. The elevator stopped on every floor. It arrived at the thirteenth. I felt like at the casino, “No bets. Thirteen, black, odd”. I didn’t know what Maria’s bet was. I didn’t move. She stepped forward and looked at me “Are you regretting it already?”

Almost thirty-six and I was going to live with a woman for the first time in my life. A milestone. A compromise I never thought I would take on.

Someone had done their homework in the control process. They were completely standardized. Same story. This time at a table where Maria and I sat. Just as impersonal. Reading of both implants. Result on the screen:

Sector 9

Section 87

Housing 53JYX

At ground floor there was an area with interactive screens where we could display a map to get to our new house. We would receive all the necessary information. The following day we were required to come back to get our new jobs assigned.

We had jumped on the bandwagon of welfare. A new era was beginning for humanity. A new world. We were survivors. We were writing history.

On our way home, arm in arm with Maria, I felt I was the luckiest man on Earth.

* * *

Outside Vancouver, Canada

Creating the world we want is a much more powerful process than destroying what we do not want.

Marianne Williamson

It didn't take the group a long time to come back. Less than two days after the explosion, we saw them again. Cautious. Entering the scenery in sequence. The first were Kojak and the Blacksmith. They were armed. Both of them, with firearms. They entered our field of vision from the spot where our Earthship once was. They walked slowly. Kicking the rubble with their feet. They found parts of dead bodies. They checked up the barn's surroundings, the orchard, the veg patch... All of it devastated.

Through the periscope we could see no trace of the others.

They were in the area over an hour. Mark was watching them. They were with the dogs. They didn't speak. They talked in sign language. They must have assessed the scene from a distance before deciding to come forward. They disappeared and returned after a while with Paul, David, Anselme and Katsumi. We couldn't see the women or the children. They searched the area again. We heard some random words. Their faces showed disbelief. Who could have done this? Whose body parts were scattered all over the place?

They disappeared for hours and came back again. Only the men.

Just forty-eight hours left of our countdown. We didn't know where they had camped. They shouldn't be too far away, perhaps we were in luck and the

dogs wouldn't hear the opening of the hatch. That would give us some extra time to figure out the introductions.

We hardly slept during those last two days. The children could perceive our nervousness. We had explained to them that the bunker would open up, that the group that had been living in our home for the past few months had come back, that we had to interact with them, to get them to accept us and allow us to join their group. It would be easier to survive with them than by ourselves. We explained to them that it would be difficult at the beginning, that they may have misgivings but that they shouldn't be afraid however tense the situation was. As far as we knew, they seemed quite good people. We'd be able to get along with them.

The moment arrived. The clock inside the bunker scored the coveted 00:00:00 of the countdown. Mark turned the wheel of the hatch. It wasn't too noisy. Not enough to be heard from afar. As expected the soil that was so difficult to place before closing the bunker, had become compacted. Rachel and Patrick were in the furthest corner from the hatch. With a prop, we started to unpack the earth that separated us from freedom. The first five feet were the hardest. The prop knocks sounded like hammer blows. They would be here shortly.

Ten cubic feet of earth. Around two hours until the first rays of sunlight entered the bunker. We didn't see them, but we knew they were there. We heard their voices. They were asking us something. It was noisy. Too much confusion. We placed the ladder. Mark was the first to climb up the steps. As he did, he kept saying reassuring words in a loud and clear voice. When his head popped out, several weapons were pointing at him. Who was he? Where was he coming from? What was he doing underground? Was he alone? What had happened to the farm? Who were those dead men they had found?

Mark made a show of his coolness, empathy and social skills. He explained that he owned that land with his wife and our two children. We had been locked in the bunker, from which he was coming out, since shortly after the blackout. A few days ago a group of men, violent, greedy, cruel, had arrived. They had killed the animals, wasted and looted the food, destroyed everything. They didn't respect life. He had blown his own house to defend the group standing before him right now. He had killed the intruders. They were guerrillas, militia or some type of urban tribe. They were armed and would not have hesitated to harm them.

He asked for permission to get out. Their weapons continued to be aimed at him, but they let him come out. He told them his children and his wife were still inside. His son would come out first, followed by his wife and daughter. She was only one year old. He asked them not to point their weapons at her.

Patrick got out. I came out right after him with Rachel on my back. They helped me out.

They were perplexed. They couldn't believe it, but soon realized we weren't a threat. We were told to go with them to their camp. They had camped in a clearing close to the lake. The women and the children were waiting there. Their faces reflected surprise along with fear in the children's faces. We settled down with them. We explained our decision to hide in the bunker. Our life for the past five months. How we had watched them through the periscope since they arrived. How we lived the arrival of the intruders. The decision to blow up our whole lives to defend them, to defend ourselves against a real threat when the bunker opened up. We had been isolated from the world. We didn't know what had happened during that time. What was the real situation.

They told us what happened during the first weeks of the blackout in Vancouver. How the situation had become unmanageable. How, for that reason, they had ended up there.

We spent days talking. Exchanging information. During those days, we took out from the bunker everything that could be useful. We had sleeping bags, a tent, enough warm clothing for all, coal, tools... When they went down with Mark, they couldn't believe we had been living there. Underground. Under them. They finally got to understand the dogs' nervousness whenever they approached the area, they put two and two together with regards to the energy leakage, they understood why there wasn't any food in the house.

With the provisions we still had in the bunker, the food they had been picking up around the veg patch and the orchard, and the little hunting that we could still find in the forest, we could survive for several weeks. But we had no future there. We couldn't rebuild the farm. The days grew colder. The nights even more. Some days we had snowflakes. Almost every night the temperature dropped below zero.

None of us wanted to. But we were all aware that our only option was to go back to Vancouver. Our car had been parked far from the farm, so it hadn't blow up like the rest of our property. Mark had several petrol cans stored in the bunker along with a pair of batteries. We could use it to go to an inhabited area.

The expedition was comprised of Mark, Ciarán and Dylan. The road to Vancouver was deserted. They saw no one. There was no traffic, no cars or trucks. It seemed as if there wasn't any life, as if the population had disappeared.

At the entrance to Vancouver a group of soldiers stopped them. They identified themselves as members of the Peace Army. Our group wasn't

allowed to enter into the city with a vehicle. Vancouver was now one of the productive cells of the nine pillars. None of our group members was an adhered member. They weren't modified Humans. If they wanted to access, they had to be escorted. The next day, there was a scheduled conference for new members at the BC Place Stadium. They were given permission exclusively to go to that conference. They were given no further explanation.

Their goal was to obtain as much information as possible, and whatever they were going to discuss at the stadium would have to do with the situation in Vancouver. They had to show up. They had to understand what was meant by the the nine pillars, the production cells, the Peace Army. They had to find out what had happened to Canada, to the world.

As planned, the following day they attended the conference. They made contact with the new world order. The BC Place was bursting with people. Its capacity was about sixty thousand. Everyone was shouting and acclaiming the members of the families that represented the new order, the nine pillars, the corp world, the nine rules, the nine compromises. The crowd cheered. They were the saviours of the world.

A battered population with despair written on their faces, queuing up to sign the commitment to this new world order. Accepting the terms of semi-slavery that they were being sold, in return for feeling protected, safe. Humanity had become orphaned of leaders. It had lost its way. Years ago it had sold its initiative and ability to survive to welfare and consumption. They were obsequious followers. They were a flock. They needed a shepherd. Someone to guide them, to tell them what to do and how to do it. The price didn't matter.

Security and control measures to get into the conference were impressive. Our three were among the few, if not the only ones, at least through the door they chose to leave, that didn't join the long adhesion queues. Another military group stopped them at the exit. If they weren't to adhere, they didn't have the right to stay in Vancouver. The city was a productive cell owned by the nine pillars. They accompanied our group to one of the exit controls on the outskirts of the city.

The car was still there when they returned. That same night they were back in our camp.

The situation was like this. The Corporations had taken over the world. It started in the West and afterwards, they also signed a peace treaty with the Islamic nation, with whom they had fought bitterly for months. Two thirds of the population had died during the blackout. The remaining were adhering the new system massively. A world organized in a matrix structure of knowledge and families, all controlled by the Corporations. Those who joined this organization received a genetic implant that enabled them to be identified within the organization as well as to access the benefits and

privileges derived from their work. The Peace Army enforced the interests of Corporations, who of course used the power of this peaceful army to take over the productive assets that only a few months ago were owned by others. If you didn't belong to the corporations you didn't have access to any of their products, services or benefits. By accepting their conditions, Corporations guaranteed a suitable level of comfort and welfare. It was a fascist system underpinned by the politics of fear. The fear of not being able to survive without Corporations. The fear of the deterrent Peace Army. The fear of facing an uncertain future.

The soldiers who escorted them out labelled them as resilient. Any unmodified human being was a resilient. There were some, not many, who had refused to enter the corp world. Outdated hippies who had started autarkic and anarchic communities that wouldn't last for more than a few months.

Speaking from fear, ignorance and a lack of initiative, the adheres' opinion about those who they called resilient was understandable. But we weren't afraid of an uncertain future. Altogether we had quite enough knowledge on self-sufficient life and each one of us, in his or her own way, had amply demonstrated initiative and the ability to overcome tough situations.

If there were resilient communities, we'd find them. If there weren't, we would establish the first one.

None of us wanted to commit to the new rules. None wanted implants with genetic improvements. Electronic shackles that wouldn't let us leave this new world order, designed to further restrict the freedoms of human beings.

We wanted to be free. Living in harmony with our environment, with Mother Earth. Not consuming more than we strictly needed. Not damaging the environment that gave us life. Connecting with the energy of the universe. Enjoying the intensity of a deprogrammed life. The adventure of finding peace within ourselves. Laying the foundations of a world in which human beings could live in cooperation and not in competition.

We were resilient. Our new life had just begun.

* * *

EPILOGUE

The same people who created the sleepers, karišklik and výpadek, managed to remove them from the grid. Those who brought chaos and death to this Earth happened to be the saviours of the planet, after signing the durable peace treaty. The *Brahmin* got reorganized. Their wars destroyed the decadent world that they had created centuries ago, to build a new world best suited to their present needs, to their future desires. They issued the nine rules, the nine compromises. And hand in hand with the *Kshatriya*, they regained control. A new era started for them, the age of the nine pillars. They eliminated the middlemen, they did away with country borders, with the politicians, with the governments, with any private property of the outcasts, with everything that was not their corporations.

The pariahs, the outcasts who had failed to listen to Gaia, those who were still lost in the maze of their own screams, in their cries of loss and uncertainty, they heard the call of the *Brahmin*, the call of their former owners. Owners who had returned to get them. Who had not forgotten. They had built new cages to restore their security, their stability, their comfort, their welfare.

The wheel was spinning once again. Bigger. More powerful. More authoritarian. More controlling. The outcasts were genetically modified. They were marked and positioned. The *Brahmin* had taken a further step, they had created a new species, Homo corps. A gender directed by remote control. Human beings that belonged to them, and they did so out of their own free will. Voluntarily, the outcasts accepted the nine rules, the new chains that would link themselves and their children for life to the *Brahmin*.

When the *Brahmin* got enough followers in their new system, the ablution period began. Many were erased from the families. The first goal of the ablutions was the ideology of the nine pillars. Some outcasts, were able to join the families, due to the power and wealth they had accumulated before the blackout. The pre-blackout ultra-capitalist system had become inefficient. It enabled many to gain a power that did not belong to them. During the construction of the nine pillars, that power gave them the key to link up with the families. It was a mistake solved by the ablutions. The *Brahmin* called it the purification of the families. They managed to strip off from the nine pillars the few ideals of equality and justice that the infiltrated outcasts had printed over the design of the new system.

Once the families had been purified, the Board of the nine pillars approved new laws, more restrictive, more repressing, more constrictive. The *Kshatriya* were given more power. The outcasts began to feel the oppression that could only be mitigated through escaping to virtual worlds, to the digital cloud.

Meanwhile, the resilient continued to awaken in different parts of the Earth. With the spirit of collaboration as opposed to that of competition, we tried to establish a framework of coexistence with the corp production cells. The Board of the nine pillars refused to talk to us. We became outlaws. They condemned any contact with unmodified humans. We were denied access to technology. They forbid the resilient from extracting any natural resources anywhere on the planet. We were denied what Gaia had granted us.

It was at this time that the resilience became organized. We created incursive commandos, designed to attack the productive cells of the corps. We acted quickly. From the underground. We carried out our missions in the shortest possible time. The Peace Army rarely intercepted a command, unless they had a stroke of luck.

The incursive commandos provided technology and natural resources to the resilient communities. It was the basis to start the construction of self-sufficient units, integrated with the habitat to which we belonged. We adapted our lifestyle to each environment. We learned to co-exist with Gaia, to respect Her, protect Her. We designed plans to attack the nine pillars. We undermined their cells in charge of the extraction of natural resources. We boycotted plantations of genetically modified foods to prevent them from being spread thereby potentially attacking Gaia's micro-organisms and other living creatures. The resilient biotechnologists studied the improved genetic modules on the adheres who fled from the corps, martyrs who died to achieve freedom and who gave the resilience the necessary knowledge to be able to remove these modules without damaging the carrier body.

The resilience got to emulate improved genetic modules, which allowed us to introduce infiltrators in the productive cells. We mocked their

identification systems and sow the seeds of doubt, dissent and discrepancy within its core, inside their nucleus. Among the outcasts, a new trend of opposition against the nine pillars began to circulate. The infiltrators facilitated the escape of the adherees who wanted to leave the corps. We could make the adherees override compliance of the eighth rule. Each desertion was a race against the clock in which winning meant saving the adheree's life.

The *Brahmin* underestimated us. They thought the resilience would die during the first year, during its establishment plan. It didn't. Gaia guided us. The collective subconscious gave us the power to share information. Resilient communities reached a level of innovation with which corporations could not compete.

Not many of us embraced Gaia in the early days of our era, but those of us who did had such a degree of conviction and a level of communion with Mother Earth, that we were able to develop our own morphogenetic fields, energy fields that merged with the collective consciousness of Gaia.

Resilience was born as an alternative to the world of the *Brahmin*. The hope of Humanity laid in Gaia. Gaia, who had been outraged, abused, over-exploited, She tended us the bridge to the truth. She illuminated Humanity on the path to freedom and happiness. A path that the resilient walked along the era of Gaia.

Chronicles of the resilient

Volume I, Book I

NOTES

¹ Gaia, the primal Greek goddess of the Earth

² Výpadek: Blackout in Czechoslovakian

³ Karişiklik : Chaos in Turkish

⁴ Kōan: Problems set out by the Zen teachers to their pupils to probe them

⁵ UPS: Uninterruptible Power Supply

⁶ Al-Andalus: Name given to the area conquered in the Iberian Peninsula during the Arab Empire

⁷ Salah: To pray in Arabic. It is also the name given to the five daily prayers of the Muslim

⁸ Maghrib: Forth Salah of the Islam. They pray it after twilight

⁹ Minato: Suburb of Tokyo

¹⁰ Jinni: Super-natural genie or creature in Arab folklore In the Islamic religion, jinnis, humans and angels are the creations to whom Allah granted intelligence

¹¹ Haima: Tent of the desert's nomad campsites

¹² Shisha: Water pipe to smoke tobacco of different flavours

¹³ Maa': Water in Arabic

¹⁴ Ana marīda: I am ill in Arabic

¹⁵ Bushra: Arabic feminine name meaning good omen

¹⁶ Bivouac: French word, well accepted in other languages, meaning to camp out in the open

¹⁷ Eighth Hadith, according to Al-Nawawi recopilation: "I have been ordered to fight against people until they testify that there is no other truth than Allah, and that Mohammed is the messenger of Allah and until they perform the prayers and pay the Zakat. And if they do so, they will have gained protection from me for their lives and property unless they do acts that are punishable in accordance to Islam and their reckoning will be with Allah the Almighty"

¹⁸ Xasa, refers to those Beja whose main language is tigre, and not to-bedawiye (the common language to all Bejas)

¹⁹ Agee-zay in the Beja language means nomad, globetrotter

²⁰ Harob is the Beja name for sorghum. It is the fifth cereal in crop surface in the world, following maize, rice, wheat and barley

²¹ Lutte: Fight in French

²² A tout à l'heure: See you later in French

²³ The Beja clans are divided into families, the bedana and in sub-families, the hissa. The sheikh is the head of the bedana, the main authority of the family group

²⁴ Al-Qâhira: Arabic name for Cairo

²⁵ Qurtuba: Arabic name for Cordoba (Spain)

²⁶ Ifriqiya: Arabic name for Africa

²⁷ Umma: All those that follow the Islamic religion

²⁸ Dâr al-Islâm: Islamic territory

²⁹ Siqilliya: Name given to the area conquered in the south of Italy during the Arab Empire

³⁰ Dâr al-Harb: War territory

³¹ Shari'a: Religious code of conduct. It makes up the corpus of Islamic Law. It is based on the Quran

³² Hinna: vegetable dye used to colour hair and skin

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If you want to know more about the Blackout:

<http://blackouttheoutage.blogspot.com>



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